ELLERY QUEEN

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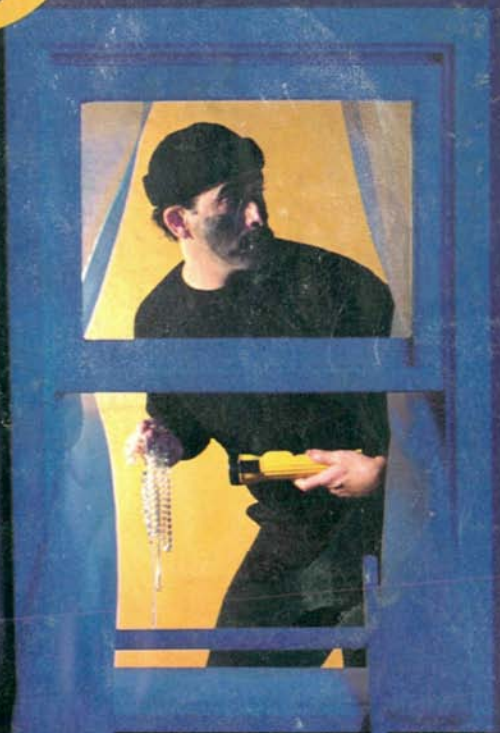

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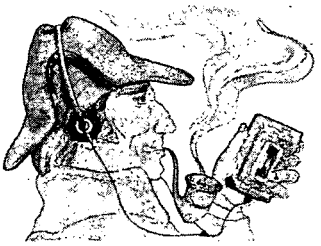

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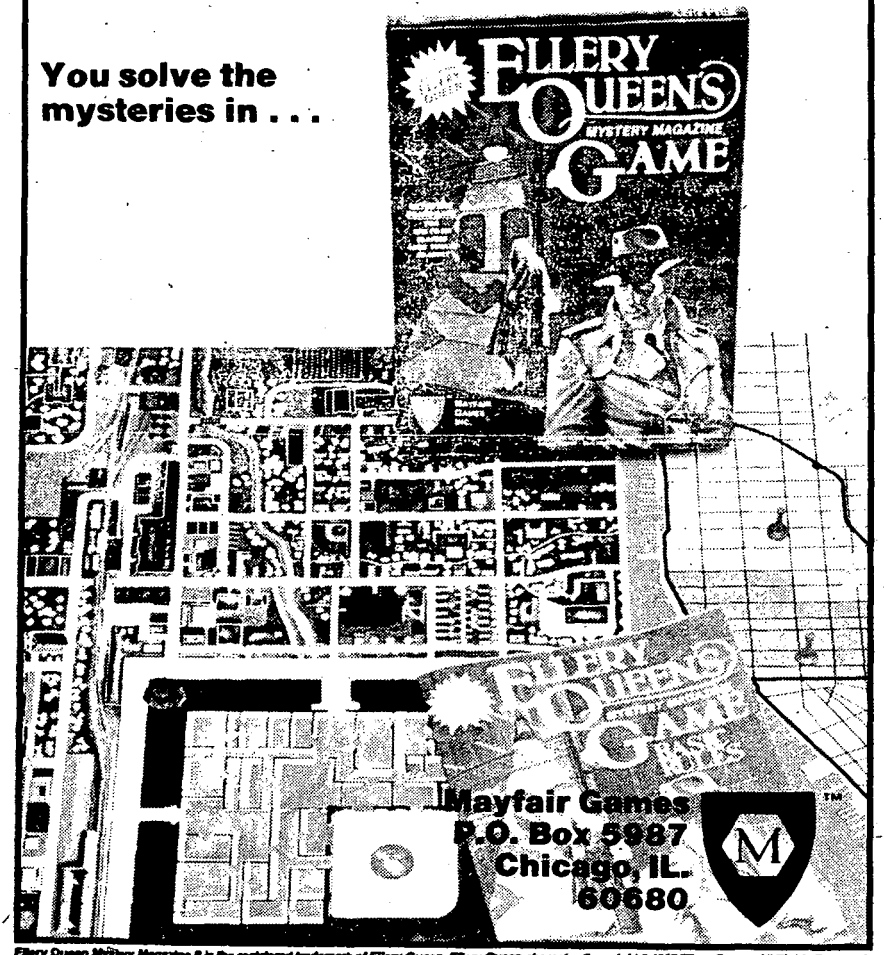

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THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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a *NEW* short story by

JEAN POTTS

"Jean Potts does not, perhaps, write the most cheerful of mystery novels," wrote Kathleen L. Maio in Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, *"but her exploration of the effects of violence on lifelike characters is no mean accomplishment." You will see this virtu in this new story from Jean Potts. There have been all too few stories from this fine author's pen, but what there have been, to paraphrase Spencer Tracy from* Pat and Mike, *"are choice" . . .*

IN THE ABSENCE OF PROOF

by JEAN POTTS

The murder of Everett Brewster, leading citizen of North Ridge, occurred on a Saturday in August, late afternoon or thereabouts, and was discovered shortly after noon of the next day by his daughter and her husband.

They had married a year ago—Martha Brewster, Everett's only child, and Jeffrey Nicoleau, feature writer and manager of the weekly *North Ridge News,* which Everett owned, along with the lumber yard and a number of other concerns. Whether or not Martha had married him at her father's urging was anybody's guess; certainly she did so with his approval. She had seemed no more taken with Jeff, engaging though he was, than with any of her other suitors. Quite a procession of them, for aside from the money she would someday inherit Martha was attractive in an offbeat way. Taller than average, rangily built, with a lot of untidy gypsy-dark hair and amber-flecked eyes, clear and inscrutable as a cat's.

Like her father, she was a loner, with as little aptitude as he for socializing, and as little need. Her favorite pursuits were solitary:

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sketching and drawing, rambling in the woods, swimming—she loved the water and was as much at home in it as a fish—but there again she preferred to be by herself. Which was just as well, since Jeff was no better at swimming than at other sports. His pet enthusiasm was the local little-theater group, where he was the undisputed star. Maybe it was their very differences—Jeff so outgoing, Martha so reclusive—that drew them to each other. Anyway, the marriage seemed to work.

Their home, a wedding gift from Everett, was one of the ultramodern houses designed for the affluent young married crowd, in what was called the "new" part of North Ridge. As opposed to Jug Lane, at the other end of town, a secluded area of widely spaced "old family" houses dating back to the 1800s, all of them spacious and imposing, none more so than the Brewster house—where Everett stayed on alone (Martha's mother had died several years ago) except for the housekeeper who came in to cook and clean.

They weren't unduly concerned, at first, over their unsuccessful attempts to reach him by phone that Sunday morning. He could be out in the yard, or off on some errand. Or maybe he had unplugged the phone, as he often did. But when they were still unable to raise him by noon, Martha showed signs of uneasiness. This particular weekend, with his housekeeper on vacation and his nearest neighbors out of town, he was very much on his own. Nobody but his dog, Socksie—a mutt, black except for her white front feet; everybody's friend, especially Everett's. If something was wrong—a fall, a sudden illness—Socksie would do her best to raise the alarm. But would anyone hear her?

It was no use trying to check with Miss Addie, Everett's sister, a retired schoolteacher and the sociable one of the family. Today the Self-Culture Club was staging its annual luncheon and Miss Addie was running the show. As Martha pointed out when Jeff suggested calling her. (He did so tentatively; he and Addie were not on good terms.)

"That's right. I forgot," he said. And after a pause, with a show of casualness: "I could drive over there and check up. Just to make sure everything's okay."

"I'm coming with you," said Martha.

"Well, of course if you—"

"Yes. I've got the keys. Come on."

Neither of them spoke during the drive across town. Jeff was at

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the wheel; Martha sat stiff as a figurehead, bent forward a bit, hands clenched in her lap, eyes straight ahead.

Still in silence, he made the turn into Jug Lane. It lay in Sunday peace, sun-dappled, its velvet lawns stretching out on either side, green except for the blaze of August flowerbeds, and beyond them its gracious houses screened from each other and the world by the nobly spreading old trees.

All very much the way it looked when Jeff first saw it three years ago. But since then there had been a radical change in Jeff's status. In those days he was an outsider, a stranger newly arrived from California to claim the dilapidated farmhouse he had inherited from the sole survivor of his mother's family, the Jeffreys, and which he had undertaken to restore. A long-term project to tackle on his own: he still spent most of his spare time out there working on it. The difference was that now he was not only an established citizen of North Ridge; as Martha Brewster's husband, he belonged here in Jug Lane, accepted as one of their own by those who had been born belonging here, with the right, in due time, to the most beautiful house of all.

It was at the very end of the Lane, where the road, too, ended. In the woodsy stretch behind it there was only a footpath. He drove on, through the hot stillness. Hardly a leaf stirred in the trees above, and the last two houses before Everett's stood closed up, vacant for the weekend. No sign of life ahead, either—only the empty curve of the driveway and the white columns of the portico gleaming through the thick shade.

They were nearly there when Martha spoke. "Where's Socks?"

A good question. Ordinarily she would have been on hand before this, a self-appointed reception committee, barking her welcome, wagging all over in a transport of joy.

"Maybe she's off in the woods."

"Maybe. But—no, she's shut up inside, somewhere in the back. There. I can hear her. Can't you?"

Sure enough. The hopeless whimpering sound rose to a near howl as Jeff slowed in front of the house. "Wait," he said, for Martha seemed on the point of jumping out before he came to a full stop, "I can drive around to the back—"

But she already had the door open. "Let me out here," she said. And she was off like a shot, halfway up the portico steps.

For one last moment Jeff stayed where he was. Then he followed her inside.

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From the side hall that led back to the kitchen came the rapid thud of her sneakers, and her voicie: "All right, Socksie, I'm coming," alternated with "Dad! Dad?" Socks had recovered enough of her natural high spirits to yelp instead of whimper. There was no other response.

Jeff took a different route—past the graceful staircase, through the formal parlor, the adjoining cozier sitting room, the dining room with its glitter of crystal chandelier, its sideboard and table polished to a mellow glow—and finally to the study.

From the doorway nothing was to be seen. But a few steps into the room, past the desk, and there it was: the body diminished to a crumpled heap; the ruined head; beside it, the poker on the Persian rug, which was rucked up and askew.

At the sound of footsteps from the rear of the house, he let out a hoarse, urgent warning: "Martha! Don't come in here, Martha!"

Too late. She was already at the door, shielded from the sight of her father's body by the desk and by Jeff himself. Socks was beside her—no longer her usual friendly self, but this creature, changed beyond belief, almost beyond recognition, wild-eyed, stiff-legged with menace, teeth bared in a snarl, ready to spring at him. In the nick of time Martha grabbed her by the collar.

"Socksie! What's the matter with you? Stop it, or I'll—" She broke off and went very white. She had seen: not only had the struggle with Socks drawn her farther into the room but under imminent attack Jeff had automatically stepped to one side. Now he started toward her. Socks, though she had given up on the lunging business, warned him off with a deep-throated growl.

Martha stood with her hand frozen on the dog's collar, all her attention focused on what lay beyond Jeff. No screaming for her. No collapsing in hysterics. That was not her style. A shudder, violent but brief. A whisper, "Dad," hardly more than a sigh.

"Oh, God,"Jeff burst out. "Oh my God, Martha, I came in and—"

"Murdered," she said, with stark finality. And she shifted her gaze to Jeff. One of her level cat looks, self-contained and knowing.

Again he burst out, this time a near babble. "Martha darling, don't look at me like that. You can't think— Darling, please— You're in shock, that's it. The shock of it—"

For another long moment her gaze remained fixed on him. Then: "Yes, of course," she said quietly. She squeezed her eyes shut.

That was all. But it was enough. Jeff, after letting out his breath

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with a strangled sound, turned to the desk, fumbled for the phone, and dialed.

To Addie Brewster the identity of her brother's murderer was clear from the start. Jeffrey Nicoleau, of course. She had pronounced him a bad apple the minute she laid eyes on him three years ago and had been waiting ever since for him to prove it. Well, now he had. No doubt about it in her mind.

"It couldn't have been anybody but him," she told the detectives who showed up to interview her. Two mannerly young fellows: outsiders, part of the state-police crew from Boston that converged on North Ridge to take charge of the investigation. "Nobody else had the opportunity or the motive. Jeff had both. Oh, I know he claims he spent Saturday afternoon and evening working on that old house he inherited. I don't doubt he was there part of the time. But if you've seen the Jeffrey place yourself, you know there's a short cut from it through the woods, a path that leads into the end of Jug Lane, right into Ev's back yard. A fifteen-minute walk, that's all."

From their place on the couch across the room from her, the detectives eyed her, still politely, but with a new wariness. She could tell from the slight stiffening of their faces that they had not expected what they were getting from her. All right, it wasn't her fault that strangers were inclined to mistake her for a nice little old lady. That might be what she looked like—small and pigeon-shaped as she was, with her curly white hair and faded blue eyes—but that wasn't what she was, and the sooner they found it out the better.

There was no comment from either of them. The one who seemed to be the spokesman for the pair nodded. And waited. The one with the notebook waited, too, pen poised for the next installment.

Well, then, let them have it. "They must have had an appointment, because Jeff's name is on Ev's desk calendar, in Ev's handwriting. Right there on the page for Saturday. Don't try to tell me it was just a reminder to himself to call Jeff, the way he says. In the first place, there's no phone at the old Jeffrey house, which is where Jeff would be on a Saturday—especially with Martha off at the Guild Hall flower show all day, and evening, too. So how could Ev have called him? It's plain as the nose on your face, they'd arranged to get together at Ev's house, probably for supper, with Jeff on his own, and only a short walk away."

Still no comment. The spokesman cleared his throat. The one with the notebook bent to his work.

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"He had the opportunity, all right, *and* the motive," Addie repeated, leaning forward, warming to her subject. In her opinion, Jeff had an excellent motive—namely, the change Ev was planning to make in his will. Instead of leaving the house in Jug Lane to Martha, as his will now specified, he had made up his mind to bequeath it and all its contents to the town of North Ridge, for the purpose of establishing it as a museum. Many of the furnishings were indeed museum pieces, and the house itself dated back to the early Nineteenth Century and had been admirably maintained. The place was worth a fortune, a fortune that Addie asserted Jeff had had his eye on from the start. At the prospect of being done out of it, he had exploded into murderous rage. All right, unpremeditated—but once the deed was done, cool-headed as you please, he had wiped the poker clean of fingerprints and shut Socksie up in the kitchen before going his way.

When she had finished, the spokesman at last found his tongue enough to say, "Yes. Well. We'll check this out, of course. Thank you, Miss Brewster. You've been very cooperative." A noncommittal statement if she ever heard one—and just a touch glib, as if this might be a formula, one routinely used in brushing off harmless eccentrics and their crackpot theories. The possibility that anyone could see her, Addie Brewster, in such a light jolted her.

And before she could collect her wits enough to get out a word, the interview was over. They stood up, shook her hand, and departed.

While she waited for further developments, Addie did a little detective work on her own. For what it was worth. Not much. Except for the young couple, acquaintances of Jeff's at the little-theater group, who had driven past the old Jeffrey place early Saturday evening and, seeing his car there, had stopped to say hello. He didn't answer when they knocked at the door. They figured he must have been working in the attic, or the basement, out of earshot. Which was no doubt how Jeff would explain it. All the same, Addie reported it—one more crumb of evidence—to the fellow in charge at the police station. Another outsider; her two weren't there.

Maybe they had taken her theory more seriously than she thought and were busy checking it out? If so, they didn't let her in on the results. By next morning, though she hadn't given up hoping, she was at a pretty low ebb.

And that was when the breakthrough came, from the most unlikely of all sources—so unlikely that at first she didn't recognize

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it as a breakthrough, any more than Loony Louie himself did. When she answered the doorbell, there he was, a skinny, bleary-eyed old fellow, none too bright, and given to solitary binges that left his mental equipment in even sorrier shape than usual. Today there was more to it than the post-binge fantods. Addie realized as he reached for her hands and started blubbering about "Mr. B."—his name for Ev—that Louie was here to express his condolences. A pathetic gesture, verging on the maudlin. But Addie wasn't her normal hardy self. Tears welled up in her eyes. She clung to Louie as if they were soul mates and her voice quavered, even though she didn't so much invite him as order him to come in for a cup of coffee. "From the looks of you, you could use one," she said.

Hangdog, braced for the lecture customary on these occasions, he followed her into the living room. But she left it at that. She was still too close to tears, in fact, to risk saying much of anything. So for once Louie had the floor to himself. She sat huddled in her chair, sipping her coffee and only half listening while he rambled on. About Mr. B. mostly, with now and then a detour before he got back on the track.

It was almost a week since Ev's death. But Louie, holed up in his shack half a mile from town with a bottle for company, hadn't heard about it until today. The news hit him hard. "Nobody to beat him," he said, and every time he said it—which was often—he sniffled. "All the years I've known him, all the jobs I've done for him, and never any haggling about the pay or how long it took. Not that he didn't expect a good job. No, sir. He laid it out, what he wanted, and then by gum he left you to do it. Nobody to beat him, Miss Addie, I could always count on him."

He could, indeed. In spite of his deficiencies, Louie wasn't a bad hand at painting, plastering, and carpentering; at one time or another, practically everyone in North Ridge, including Addie, had hired him for one of the odd jobs that kept him halfway solvent. But Ev was his mainstay, a reliable provider not only of work but of the "advance" needed when another emergency cropped up in Louie's life.

He maundered along with his jumble of reminiscences: "The last time I seen him, the last job I was ever to do for him, out there in the side yard, fixing the rose trellis, oh, Miss Addie, this morning when I heard them talking, in the supermarket it was, everybody talking, the clerks and all, that was the first I heard of it."

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Addie's mind wandered. But Jeff's name brought her back. There it was again—"Mr. Nick."

And another word—"Saturday."

She snapped to attention. Once more straight as a ramrod, every inch the stern schoolteacher she used to be, she fired her questions at him.

"What was that? Mr. Nick? *Which* Saturday?"

It took a while. Louie, too startled to answer, just sat there goggling at her. But she didn't let up, and in the end she got it out of him.

And when she had: "You mean to say you were *there* in the side yard, fixing Ev's trellis, last Saturday, the day he was murdered? And you heard him and Mr. Nick? Why on earth didn't you tell me right off? My heavenly saints above, don't you *see*—"

Well, that was how Louie was. Dim. A perfect butt for all the jokes that were played on him. He not only fell for them every single time, he didn't seem to mind—cackled right along with the pranksters once he caught onto the joke. Naturally, he didn't grasp the significance of the story Addie had pried out of him.

Boiled down, it went like this: he had been working late that fateful Saturday afternoon in Mr. B.'s side yard, the same side as the study, so he couldn't help hearing them quarreling in there—the two of them, Mr. B. and Mr. Nick, going at it hammer and tongs. He never did make out what the argument was about—both of them talking at once and Mr. B.'s dog barking her head off—and he didn't stay to find out. Figured it was none of his business. Just packed up his tools and left at sundown when there wasn't enough light to go on with the job.

After that—well, the thing of it was, Mr. B. had paid him in advance and—

"And you blew it on a bottle," Addie cut in. "I'm not interested in how you waste your time and money, Louie. It's got nothing to do with Ev. That's all that matters. Justice," she said fiercely. "Justice must be done. Come along, Louie."

She whisked him out of the house into her car, and before he knew what was happening she had pulled up in front of the police station. There she issued her instructions. He was to tell his story again, just as he had told it to her. That was all. The same story. He still had it straight in his mind? All right, then. She hopped out from behind the wheel and, with Louie shambling after, marched onward as to war . . .

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"I wouldn't call it that," said Homer Wells, the Brewster family lawyer and lifelong friend. He sat at his desk, tilted back in his swivel chair, with his hands clasped on top of his balding head. "No, Addie, it's hardly an open-and-shut case."

"I'd like to know why not! Louie was there, he heard them quarreling."

"So he says."

"The police must believe him or they wouldn't have arrested Jeff."

"They're holding him for questioning," Homer corrected her. "Not quite the same thing."

"Near enough. Anyway, it's not just Louie's story. There's Jeff's name on the calendar and—" She took a long breath. "Look, Homer, it had to be someone Ev knew, because he opened the door. No question about that, is there?"

"So the circumstances would seem to indicate."

"You bet they would. No signs of forced entry or struggle or tampering with the burglar-alarm system. No valuables missing. Stop quibbling and use your common sense. Jeff was a fifteen-minute walk away. Not only that, he's the only one with a motive—" Once more she launched into her pet theory. Homer, who had heard it before, closed his eyes while she held forth.

"In the first place," he said when she was through, "you're basing all this on the assumption that Jeff knew Ev was planning to change his will. I'm not saying it's a false assumption, but if it is, then your whole idea falls apart. In the second place, if you're right and he did know, then *how* did he know? I hope you're not suggesting that I told him."

"Don't be ridiculous. In case you're wondering, neither did I. I don't speak to him at all if I can help it."

Homer nodded. "The only other person who knew about Ev's plan is Martha, and she says she didn't tell him. It's hard for me to believe she'd lie—or tell Jeff to begin with—though I suppose it's barely possible."

"No, it isn't. Not even barely."

"Well, then." He leaned back in his chair.

"You left out Ev," said Addie.

"You think Ev told him?"

"I'm sure he did. It wouldn't seem right to him not to. He said as much to Martha and me. 'I'm not going to change my mind,' he told us, 'but it's only fair the family should know.' That included Jeff. Ev thought of him as his own flesh-and-blood son. Trusted him like

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a son. Don't ask me why—we all have our blind spots—but he took to Jeff from the word go." Her voice shook a little. "Well, of course we had no objection. You know how Martha is, all she cares about is her garden and her painting. Besides, the house wasn't the whole of his estate. But it was the part Jeff had set his heart on. It was what they quarreled about, and it was why he killed Ev."

"Always assuming Louie's telling the truth."

"Of course he's telling the truth! He's not bright enough to make up such a story."

"I know he's not bright, Addie. That's one of the problems. If Jeff is brought to trial, Louie's going to be the principal witness for the prosecution. His testimony is about all they'll have to go on, and I don't doubt they'll make the most of it. But I doubt very much if it will stick. Any defense attorney worth his salt is going to make hash of him and his story in jig time. And Louie won't even know what hit him."

She opened her mouth to protest, but for once he beat her to it. "Then there's Jeff. He's bright, he's personable, he's persuasive. Very, very persuasive. An ideal witness if ever I saw one. He'll take the stand, you can be sure of that. His word against that of a drunken dim-witted handyman. Do you honestly believe the jury is going to convict him on Louie's evidence?"

"They will if there's any justice. Because it's the truth."

"I'm talking about the validity of this particular case, not about abstractions like justice and truth. They don't necessarily win a case."

"Well, but—but it's not *right*, Homer!"

"It's the way it is."

She gave him one withering look. Then she went over to the window and stood with her back to him, too roiled up to speak. When she had calmed down some, she said, "You won't take the case, then. Because you're afraid of losing."

"I wouldn't take it under any circumstances. Because I'm not a criminal lawyer, Addie. This is murder. Ev's murder. You need a real pro, Addie, the best you can get, not a small-town hack like me. If you want my advice—"

"No, thank you." She turned to face him. "I've already had enough of your advice. No point in taking up any more of your time. Or mine. I'll do what I should have done in the first place—take my business elsewhere." Pausing only to pick up her purse, she sailed out . . .

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At first Addie refused to believe the word that was going around town. Martha couldn't have put up the money to get Jeff out on bail, much less agreed to support him throughout the trial. But then Martha turned up on her doorstep, cool as you please, and told her straight out it was true.

"How can you!" Addie burst out. "Your own father, and you're siding with his murderer! Oh, how can you!"

"But, Aunt Addie—"

"Don't call me that. You're not a Brewster any more, you're nothing but Jeff Nicoleau's wife. Go back to him and stay there. You deserve each other. I'll never forgive you for this. Never."

Martha's mouth quivered a little. She said quietly, "Never's a long time."

"None too long for me," said Addie and slammed the door shut between them.

They were both at the trial: Martha projecting her image of wifely loyalty, Addie grimly watching and listening while one by one Homer's predictions came true. Louie, spruced up for the occasion and pleased at being the center of attention, did all right the first time around, but then the defense attorney went to work on him and in jig time—just as Homer had said—made hash of him. Trapped into self-contradictions, befuddled by the rapid-fire questions, Louie wound up close to blubbering.

What little was left of Addie's dwindling hopes dissolved when Jeff took the stand. His portrayal of an innocent man unjustly accused was all the more convincing for being low-keyed. His voice was gravely assured, his manner straightforward, his eyes clear and unwavering.

(Well, of course. Addie, having seen him in more than one little-theater production, was fully aware of his ability as an actor.) Some of his staunchest supporters burst into applause as he stepped down—appropriately enough, considering his virtuoso performance. Which was all in the world it was. But try to tell them that. Or the jury, either. They had already reached their verdict. "Not guilty" might as well have been imprinted on their foreheads. That was how plain it was.

Addie spared herself nothing. When it was over, she stood outside the courthouse and watched Jeff's triumphant emergence. He was smiling (not too much) and he had his arm around Martha. Who was not smiling—or giving any other sign of what she might or

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might not be feeling. Not so Jeff's friends. They crowded around him, eager to shake the hand of their hero.

For the most part, the other spectators gave Addie a wide berth. Except for Homer—who could have said I told you so but give him credit he didn't, just patted her shoulder and walked away, looking as shrunken as she felt—and Louie. By now the defeat had registered, even with him. Crestfallen, he shuffled up to her and mumbled, "I did like you said, Miss Addie." He brightened up a bit when she told him never mind, it wasn't his fault, and still more at the money she gave him. (Let them—whoever might see the transaction—think she was paying him off. Like as not half of North Ridge already suspected some such deal. All right, here was their proof.)

Off he went, headed no doubt for the liquor store. For another moment or two Addie stood there, too beat to do anything else. Then she squared her shoulders, set off for her car, almost as briskly as usual, and drove home.

The Nicoleaus made no show of the fortune that was theirs, or would be when Ev's estate was settled. How Jeff must be itching for the day when he could claim the Jug Lane House as his own! (Martha's, if you wanted to read the fine print, but with her concurring, Jeff's.) Not that she showed any sign of impatience. He was too slick a customer for that. While the lawyers fussed around with their red tape and their nit-picking, he and Martha stayed on in the house Ev had given them, once more settled into much the same pattern of life as before—Jeff back with his job at the *North Ridge News,* Martha going her own, mostly solitary way.

By the time the legalities were all wound up, Addie was getting pretty itchy herself. Galling though it was to her—the thought of Ev's murderer taking over his house—it was bound to happen, she had known that from the start. Now, braced for the inevitable, she just wanted them to get it over with.

Instead, what did they do but take off for a week's vacation at Perkins Lake in the cottage that had been Ev's favorite getaway spot. A small cottage on a small lake tucked away in the woods, too far off the beaten track to attract most people. Which, of course, was why Ev liked it. Jeff did, too—or claimed he did. Back in the days when he was courting Martha, Ev had invited him up there, thus officially setting his seal of approval on the marriage. So maybe Jeff really did like the place, if not for itself, then for the triumph it symbolized.

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Anyway, Perkins Lane was where they went for that last week before the scheduled move. The last week of Jeff's life, as it turned out.

Addie got the news from Homer Wells, who had just heard it from Martha and was about to drive up there to take on his responsibilities as family friend and legal advisor. There was to be an investigation, he said—there always was in cases of accidental death like this. Presumably accidental; only a thorough inquiry could rule out the possibility of foul play.

"Foul play!" cried Addie. "After the way Martha stuck with him all through the trial? That's just plain silly!"

The point would of course be given due consideration. However and nevertheless, as of now, Homer foresaw no difficulties in establishing the truth of Martha's story.

She and Jeff had been out on the lake in the canoe when the squall hit, literally out of the blue. Weather calm, slightly hazy, unseasonably warm for October; lake smooth as glass. Then the first gust, sudden and violent. It swept the paddle out of Jeff's hands. The next moment the two of them were overboard, clinging to the sides of the canoe, which had capsized and was bobbing around like a nutshell. Martha had managed to hang on and—when the gusts subsided, as they did quickly enough—swim to shore for help. Jeff had not made it.

His body had been recovered, Homer reported. There was no indication that his death was anything other than the tragic boating accident it seemed to be. He wound up tentatively. "Martha asked me to call you. If you want to go up there with me—"

"No," said Addie. After a moment's hesitation she added, "How did she sound?"

"Fairly calm. Considering. I could tell from her voice how strung up she was. She's not the sort to go to pieces. But even so—" If, as Addie suspected, it was an appeal to her better nature, he was wasting his breath. Martha would have to depend on him, not on her, for help in coping with the death of her beloved husband.

"I appreciate your letting me know," she said stiffly, and on this note the conversation ended.

It was a sensational postlude to Jeff's trial and acquittal—another trauma for North Ridge and the stuff of every tabloid reporter's dreams. Bold black headlines. Photographs. Rehashes of the unsolved murder that preceded it.

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Unsolved, indeed! Once again Addie seethed with outrage. It wasn't enough that Jeff had killed Ev and gotten away with it. Even now, dead though he was himself, he was managing to stir up all this ghoulish hoopla—pointless speculation, most of it, if not outright fabrication.

Like the piece she came across one day in the beauty parlor when she was under the drier, leafing through a trashy weekly magazine. There was a photograph of Martha, a recent one, taken up at Perkins Lake where she was awaiting the outcome of the inquiry. She had not posed for it or, to judge by the way her hand was raised as if to ward off the photographer, consented to it. For some reason it gave Addie a bit of a turn. To be sure, Martha was thinner. Her face had a scooped-out, drawn look. But that wasn't enough to explain the first fleeting impression of another, more basic change—gone before Addie could pin it down.

The accompanying story purported to be an exclusive interview. No such thing, of course. Just one more warmed-over mix of the same old ingredients, spiced up with phrases like "tragic figure" and "doomed family". With a snort, Addie tossed the magazine aside and heaved herself out from under the drier.

Homer kept her posted on the Perkins Lake investigation. First the board of inquiry probed. Then they pondered, though it beat Addie why that should be necessary, since the probing had failed to disclose any changes or discrepancies in Martha's story, or any new evidence to refute it. There was only one conclusion to be drawn, and they finally drew it: Jeffrey Nicoleau had met his death by misadventure.

Once she had the go-ahead signal, Martha lost no time in driving back home to North Ridge, where she was now secluded, according to Homer, recuperating from her ordeal. He added dutifully, "She asked about you particularly." There was no comment from Addie, and he left it at that.

Next evening, a rainy, chilly evening—Addie had a fire going in the living-room fireplace—her doorbell rang, and when she opened the door there was Martha. Her long black rain-cape made her look taller than she was and her face, framed in its hood, was startlingly white. "No," she said sharply as Addie started to shut the door on her, "I've got something to show you." And she pushed past. "Unless you're expecting visitors?"

"I'm not. Least of all you."

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Unabashed, Martha shrugged out of her cape without letting go of what she had brought shielded inside it from the drizzle. A sketchbook? She turned toward the fire. In its light her eyes sparked with amber, the one bright touch about her. Black slacks and sweater, dark hair as thick and untidy as ever, face pale and drawn. Then, too, she was so thin—the jut of her shoulderblades when she leaned forward, the brittleness of her hand when she stretched it out to the fire.

"All right," Addie said. "Would you mind telling me why you're barging in on me like this?"

"Yes. Of course. I—" Martha cleared her throat. "It's about Jeff."

"I already know about Jeff. Homer told me. Surely you're not expecting sympathy from me. If that's what you're looking for, somebody's shoulder to cry on, you're wasting your time. And mine."

Still clasping the sketchbook or whatever it was, Martha crossed the room and sat down on the couch—where she intended to stay as long as need be, no doubt about that. "I've got something to show you," she said again. "It won't take long."

Addie hesitated. But what choice did she have? Besides, she was curious. It was a sketchbook, all right, as she saw when she perched herself, bolt upright and wary, beside Martha.

"I did these especially for you," Martha said. And she opened the book. "Because—well, you'll see."

She was right. One look at the first sketch and Addie understood the import of Martha's visit and the drawings she had brought. Words didn't come easy to her; sketching did. Rough though this one was, the two figures in it were instantly recognizable—the young man with his engaging smile, the young woman with her closed-up face and mass of unruly hair. They faced each other in the canoe. He was paddling. She trailed her hand in the water. How tranquil it was: the lake smooth as a mirror, the woods beyond it, and the two figures lounging in sunny contentment.

The contrast when Martha turned the page was dramatic. Here all was a chaos of churning water, black swollen sky, and driving rain. Now nothing was to be seen of the two figures but their heads, and their hands gripping the opposite sides of the overturned boat. It slanted crazily upward—no sign of the paddle. The man's face was rigid with panic. The woman's face was not visible—only the back of her head, with her hair plastered flat against it. With the next turn of the page she seemed to be calling out to him, presumably some sort of encouragement. Lord knows he needed it. As she must

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have seen, for in the following sketch she had reached his side of the boat. He was still managing to hang on, and with help at hand he looked a shade less desperate.

Right then Addie felt the tingle along her backbone, a premonition of what was to come. And so it did. In this scene the woman had dived under water, all power and purpose—a purpose that had nothing to do with rescue. Her hands were locked on the man's ankles, clearly ready to yank him loose from his precarious hold on the boat.

One last sketch and it was over. By now the squall had spent most of its force and the surface of the lake was beginning to calm down. The boat was still there, but the man was not. Only the woman. Having accomplished her mission, she was headed, sleek as a seal, for the shore.

In the cozy living room, the fire gave a little huff, then a crackle as one of the logs shifted and flared up. No other sound, not a word uttered since Martha opened the book.

Addie let out her breath and lifted her eyes from the last drawing. "So that's how it was. You—"

"He murdered Dad," said Martha. Chillingly matter-of-fact.

"You knew all the time? And still you stood by him?"

"Because I couldn't prove it. Socksie. That's how I knew, the way she went for him. But it wasn't enough to convict him. Besides, if I came out in the open against him, he'd be on guard and I might never have a chance."

"You mean you've been waiting ever since—just biding your time until you got a chance to kill him?" To Addie such a course of action was barely imaginable. She could no more have carried it out than she could fly. That was the difference between her and Martha.

A difference that lay not in the goal—that had been the same for both of them, to see that justice was done—but in the routes they had chosen to reach it. Addie's way had been forthright: deaf to all warnings, blindly trusting that right by itself, with or without benefit of proof, was sure to triumph, she had plowed ahead. And had gone down to defeat. But for Martha there had been no illusions to blur her view of the facts. Natural-born loner that she was, she relied on nothing and nobody but herself. Stealthy and ruthless as a cat, she had stalked her prey, watching for the right moment to pounce; and, pouncing, had achieved her own private version of justice.

"It was worth waiting for," she said.

"Well, but—" No. She was too confused to go on. Too uncertain

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of what she thought. Unable to meet Martha's eyes, she fumbled helplessly with the telltale sketchbook.

"I couldn't stand it," Martha said abruptly. "I mean, not to tell you the truth. But maybe you'd rather not know."

"What!" Scandalized and abristle, Addie looked up. "You think I'm too fine-haired to face up to the truth? Well, let me tell you, Martha Brewster—" She paused, a bit startled to find that it wasn't a slip of the tongue, the Brewster. Tonight had wiped out Martha Nicoleau, once and for all. Still another discovery: she had made up her mind. No more dithering over the sketches. If in days to come her reservations about Martha's methods returned to haunt her, and they might, then so be it. She knew what she could live with and what she couldn't.

Once more her brisk, decisive self, she ripped out the sketches, marched across the room, and threw them into the fire. Picking up the poker, she jabbed at them until they blazed up fiercely. When they had shriveled into black shreds of nothing, she turned back toward Martha, who was on her feet now, motionless as a statue except for her amber-shot eyes, radiant with life.

"That's it, then," said Addie. "No proof. None whatsoever. No way on earth of proving what really happened."

She held out her arms and Martha rushed to meet her.

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a NEW Grijpstra-de Gier story by

JANWILLEM van de WETERING

Vries got up and looked out the window. "Are you going to do something or not? If not, I'll be going, but not through the door." He looked down. "It's high enough." He lifted his leg and rested it on the window sill. "Please give me a push."

Our favorite Grijpstra-de Gier story to date, which is saying a very great deal. . .

SIX THIS, SIX THAT

by JANWILLEM van de WETERING

Quite a pleasant summer morning, Adjutant Grijpstra thought, with nothing amiss except that wasp. The outsize bug hums in an irritating manner and is armed with a poisonous sting. What do I know about wasps? Do they attack without warning? Maybe not—maybe they only go for you when you bother them. How do I not bother the opponent? By sitting quietly. While observing, I will see the connection of cause and effect: how the wasp got here in the first place and how he will leave again, maybe, because the window is open.

In the same room, on the third floor of Police Headquarters in Amsterdam, opposite the adjutant, sat Sergeant de Gier, feet on his desk, head against the wall. He also observed the wasp. His hands were out and ready. He waited. The wasp dove, straight at the sergeant.

Whap.

"There you are," de Gier said. "One enemy removed." He flicked the striped corpse into the wastepaper basket. "At your service. You're welcome."

"Is that the way we're going now?" Grijpstra asked. "Violence in

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the early morning? Would that be the solution? Does the opponent have to be flattened? Without the slightest consideration?"

"Indeed," de Gier said, "I analyzed the situation and acted at once. Have you ever been stung by a wasp? This morning that didn't happen. No painful swelling, no throbbing. On the contrary, you're now experiencing a continuing feeling of peace of body. Be happy and thankful."

There was a knock on the door. A well dressed middle-aged man entered. The detectives got up and shook the man's hand. De Gier found a chair for the client. Grijpstra found paper and a ballpoint. "Yes, sir—what can we do for you?"

The man dried his skull with a silk handkerchief. An expensive watch glittered on his hairy wrist. "My name is Vries. I have a complaint."

"Go ahead," Grijpstra said.

The man talked with authority and confusion, in a civilized but nervous manner. Grijpstra wrote, de Gier listened.

"That's it?" Grijpstra asked five minutes later. The man nodded. Grijpstra cleared his throat. "Allow me to tell you what I think I've understood. You work for the supermarket chain Zwart Incorporated. You're the chief accountant. Your company has profitable outlets all over the country. Your Number One store is right here in Amsterdam—in New South, our fanciest suburb, where the well heeled live on choice and rare foods only. Before your last check, the store did well but now it doesn't. Money seems to have disappeared."

"Millions, Adjutant."

"How much exactly?"

"Two point eight million, Adjutant."

"How did you reach that figure?"

"Look here," Vries said, "we know what we're buying, right? We know what overall profit percentage we're making, right? So we know what our sales should be, right? Sixteen point eight million."

"And the actual sales were?"

"Fourteen million."

"A small mistake, perhaps?" de Gier asked. "Accountancy involves bookkeeping, does it not? Did you check the books properly this time? Did you look at the right side of the page? Administration is always off. Have you been reading the paper lately? Take the government's budget, for instance—billions come and billions go. A billion is a thousand million and you're talking about a mere two point eight."

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"Do me a favor, Constable," Vries said. "Save me your amateurish gibberish. Every figure has been chewed and digested. Don't tell me how to look at figures.

"My computers don't make mistakes and my deduction is correct. Theft is a crime and you work for the police."

"Theft means a hand reaching in from outside," de Gier said, "and the hand is connected to a masked face under a cap. What we have here is something else—embezzlement, I would say. An employee makes off with money that has been entrusted to him. Embezzlement is worst than theft, for it's especially nasty and sneaky. It therefore ranks higher on our list."

"I didn't know," Vries said.

"But you do know that your complaint is not related to violence," Grijpstra said. "Who sent you to us? We're Murder and Manslaughter. You're in the wrong room."

"Never mind," Vries said. "I was in the right room before and waited an hour. I demand prompt action. Zwart Incorporated is a pillar of our society. We provide work and feed the people. You're just sitting there. Do something, Adjutant."

"One moment." Grijpstra lifted his phone and dialed a number. "Is that you, Inspector?"

"Yes?" shouted the Inspector. "Yes? Yes? *Yes?*"

"Your client strayed into our room, sir. Some lost millions. Do you have a minute? Can I bring him in?"

"A *minute?*" shouted the Inspector. "Where? There's nothing but fraudulence in the land and we're short-staffed. The tax department has lost its safes, the rent-a-cars their cars, the building companies their building materials, and the pension funds their pensions. Railways just phoned. They've lost ten miles of track. My files are stacked to the ceiling. Yes? *Yes?*"

"A bit busy, sir?"

The telephone cackled and coughed.

"Put the phone down," de Gier said. "I saw the Inspector in the canteen a little earlier. He had dropped and broken his cup and coffee was all over his trousers. He'll be taken away soon and will have leave for the duration."

Vries got up and looked out of the window. "Are you going to do something or not? If not, I'll be going, but not through the door." He looked down. "It's high enough." He lifted his leg and rested it on the window sill. "Please give me a push."

"Are you all right, sir?"

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"Isn't suicide within your duties, Adjutant? Will my death instigate your investigation?"

"Sit down," Grijpstra said. "Tell me what you've done about this case so far."

Vries ticked off his fingers. "Checked programs. Compared results with other stores. Completed stocktaking. Followed flow of incoming goods. Checked cash registers. Screened all members of staff. Worked in the store myself."

"Found nothing?" de Gier asked.

"Found something. A difference of two point eight million guilders."* Vries produced a calculator from his pocket and placed it on Grijpstra's desk. He pressed its keys. "See how much two point eight million is? Lost in a year. You know how much that is in a day? Divided by three hundred? Sundays and holidays discounted?"

Da Gier read the result. "Nine three three comma three three three comma three three three."

"A hundred thousand a day," Vries said. "Bit of a leak, I would say."

"Illegal," Grijpstra commented, "but rather abstract, don't you think?

"A falsification," de Gier said. "Not our field, Mr. Vries. We'll pass on your complaint if you can't find the time to wait. I can promise you that a colleague will take your case. A specialist. We're all specialists here. How can we be of use to you if your complaint isn't our specialization? I assure you, sir, we know nothing about groceries."

Vries pushed the sergeant aside and replaced his leg on the window sill.

"Please," Grijpstra said. "Give this another thought. Perhaps it's not necessary to inflict violence on yourself. Are you sure there is no violence somewhere in this complaint?"

"Yes," de Gier said. "Any fights in your office? Has someone disappeared perhaps? A secretary maybe? Left an incomprehensible note and never showed her pretty face again?"

Vries thought. "Gennep never showed again."

"Murdered?" Grijpstra asked. "The name means nothing to me and I have a good memory for the lost and unfound."

"Accident," Vries said. "May this year, on Mallorca. We didn't

*One guilder = thirty-three cents

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even know he was vacationing there. A bachelor, in charge of buying machines for the administration. He slipped off a cliff."

"Were we informed?" Grijpstra asked. "I assume we weren't. Did the Spanish police issue some statement?"

"*Accidente,* Adjutant, that's what we were told."

"Tell us about this Gennep," de Gier said.

"These things shouldn't be said," Vries said, "but I can do without Gennep. He was a maker of messes. He also bought too much. I picked up after him as far as I could. Gennep didn't know the alphabet. His files were a disaster."

"Purchasing invoices referring to computers and such?"

Vries nodded.

Grijpstra studied his notes. He tore a fresh sheet from his notebook and wrote down well calligraphed figures. 16.8 − 14 = 2.8. He held up the sheet. "Like this or not like this?"

"Like that," Vries said.

"I suggest you leave us now," Grijpstra said. "You may hear from us soon. We'll take on your case."

"Catch the embezzler," Vries said and walked toward the door. "Please. My boss is a devil who haunts all my moves. He breathes on me during the day and telephones me at night. I can't go on like this. I'm going crazy."

De Gier closed the door. "He's crazy now, don't you think? Even so, accountants seem to have a way with figures. My brother-in-law is an accountant and he can add a page of telephone numbers in his head, straight from the book. What do we make of this tale? A mistake, after all? The electrons got stuck in the conduits so that the profit evaporated in a loose condenser in an odd nook of a computer? How can a deli-supermarket in New South not make a profit?" The telephone rang. The sergeant listened and spoke. He put the phone back and put on his jacket. "Something to do. A drowned bum in the inner harbor. The man is known to us and to most local bars. Coming to have a look?"

"No," Grijpstra said. He glanced at his watch. "Ten in the morning, there's still some working day left. I'm going to sniff about and will meet you at the supermarket office at three this afternoon."

De Gier left. Grijpstra contemplated. Meanwhile he looked at his equation. 16.8 − 14 = 2.8. Figures. Who would know about figures? What do figures show? Aren't they mathematical symbols? Symbols that can be rubbed off a piece of paper? Who rubbed out two point

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eight million guilders? Who blew away a sum of money sufficient, if conservatively invested, to last a luxurious lifetime?

Who knows about figures? He opened the telephone book and found the Free University's number. "The chief of the Mathematical Department, please." A female voice answered. "Hello?"

"This is the police, ma'am. Are you a professor?"

"I am."

"Adjutant Grijpstra, Murder Brigade. I would like to speak to you. What would be a good time?"

"Two o'clock," the lady said. "Elize Schoor is the name, the room is two twelve."

"Professor Schoor," Grijpstra said. "Here is a store with a yearly turnover of fourteen million, but it should be sixteen point eight million as total purchases and profit margin are known. What does that mean to you?" She's attractive, he thought. She had a lovely face. A professor in her early thirties. Step right up, step right up. And while you get closer, listen to her voice. Isn't it pleasantly low, warm, and sympathetic?

"It means," Elize Schoor said, "something. You may call me Elize. I'm rather fond of dignified heavy-set old-fashioned-looking gents. Are you married?"

"Yes, Elize."

"Happily?"

"No, Elize."

"I wasn't, either, but I'm bored with celebrating celibacy now."

She wrote.

"Look here. Do you see the equation? There is an unfavorable difference of two point eight million."

"Elize," Grijpstra said heavily, "I had reached that point myself. Please move on a little."

"You see the factor?"

"Factor, Elize?"

"Agent," Elize said. "There's a fixed agent at work here, who's unmasked by the equation. Isn't logic wonderful? Sixteen point eight divided by two point eight is *six*. Six times the difference equals the original amount. The factor is now known. *Six*. Are you following me?"

"Six times this," Grijpstra asked slowly, "six times what?"

She frowned and wrinkled her dainty nose. "The layman's vagueness, the amateur's vagary. Logic is hard, since Newton

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—although since Einstein it has softened a great deal." She bent toward him. Grijpstra inhaled her perfume. "Do you know, Adjutant, that the connection between cause and effect may no longer be valid?"

"So where does that take us?" the adjutant asked.

"Where we were in the beginning." She smiled. "Nowhere, Adjutant."

"Can you calculate nowhere?"

"Hardly." She smiled. "But isn't it better not to pinpoint the illusion? Didn't logic limit us too much?"

Grijpstra flapped his hands gently.

"You don't believe me, Adjutant?"

"But, Elize? Common sense?"

She laughed softly. "Do you know how Einstein defined common sense? The conglomeration of prejudice formed before the student's eighteenth year."

Grijpstra got up. "You must leave so soon?"

"I move on a flat surface," Grijpstra said, "within limited time. When the agent is caught, I would be honored to have dinner with you. Would that be possible?"

"Time," Elize said, "in a flat space. That's how hurry is created. From the Past through Now to Later. While nowhere is timeless." She raised her voice a little. "I cannot stop you. I have no better advice. *Six*, Adjutant—the key is the figure six. Maybe you shouldn't multiply. You might also divide."

"Six," Grijpstra said. "Right. I thank you, Elize."

She walked him to the door. "And when you have your answer, we'll share dinner. That's fine. Will my place do?"

"I'll phone," Grijpstra said. He hesitated at the door.

"Six," the professor said. "That's one plus two plus three. Or one times two times three. A holy figure in the kabbala. The star of David has six points. Kepler thought that six was the essential figure. Have you ever heard of Johannes Kepler?"

"No, Elize."

"Sixteenth century. A mathematician. We thought then that there were only six planets and Kepler thought that the relation of their various distances from the sun would hide the key to the universe. He kept calculating with six, and not quite in vain, although his supposition was false."

"Is that right?" Grijpstra asked.

"You know nothing about mathematics?"

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"Two parallel lines," Grijpstra said heavily, "cut each other in the infinite."

"Your line and mine," Elize said, "and all the others, too. You do have something there. Many a mathematician started with less."

" 'Bye," Grijpstra said, kneading the doorhandle.

He walked along a long corridor. "The incalculable," he said to the emptiness that surrounded him, "is the enemy I despise. There has to be clarity, especially at the end."

"And there *is*," Grijpstra said as he drove to the supermarket, "even before the end. We can rely on facts. If we couldn't, our very existence would be at stake."

He parked. "It's three o'clock. De Gier is here, the splendid fellow. When de Gier says he'll be somewhere at three, he'll be somewhere at three."

De Gier wasn't there.

"Twice three is a six," Grijpstra said, entered the supermarket, and asked a clerk to take him to the manager's office.

"Jansen," the manager said. "At your service. I was expecting you. The administration telephoned this morning and said the police would arrive to have a look. You came alone?"

Grijpstra nodded.

"You heard about the missing difference? There is no difference, and nothing is amiss. This store flourishes and makes a sizable daily profit. The administration has gone mad. Please sit down, Adjutant."

This is a suspect? Grijpstra thought. This kindly fellow with the name of the company embroidered on his uniform? This friendly compatriot with his open face? His short-cut hair? His blushing cheeks? His clear blue eyes? This trustworthy soul running a spick-and-span store? Why am I wasting my time?

"Mr. Vries says—" Grijpstra said coolly.

"I know, I know." Jansen pointed at his forehead. "An idiot, with permission. I make profit and he makes trouble. It's been like that for months. But there's nothing wrong. The goods come into the store in trailers and the goods leave the store in brown paper bags. The money the clients give us flows into the registers and the total is banked at the end of each day. Whatever the computer says is checked by me. Okay, there may be differences—the ladies who work the registers are human. Half a percent too little today, half a percent too much tomorrow."

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"Two point eight million," Grijpstra said coolly, "is not half a percent this way or that."

"Nah," Jansen said cheerfully.

"You've worked here long?"

"Thirty years."

"Five times six."

"Beg pardon?" Jansen asked.

"The figure six. Does six mean anything to you?"

"What?"

"A sixth of your turnover is lost, it seems."

"Nah," Jansen said. "Is craziness catching?"

"Can I look around?" Grijpstra asked.

The adjutant counted the girls who arranged packages on shelves. There were six girls, but they were joined by a seventh. He counted the boys who were opening cartons. Three boys. He counted the shelves and the counters, the tables, and the storerooms. Too many. The store was busy and getting busier. He counted, pressed by customers from all sides, the registers. There were five registers. Ladies pushed carts against his shins, toddlers climbed over his feet, a passing baby drooled on his sleeve. He was stabbed by a loaf of French bread. One. A lady grabbed eight bottles of hot sauce. A fat gent swept two candy bars off a shelf. Whoever bought three cans of bean soup got a fourth as a present. What am I counting here? the adjutant thought. I'm too stupid for this type of job. I have never been able to solve puzzles with figures. Six this, six that. There are no sixes in this store.

Mr. Jansen came by.

"Found anything, Adjutant?"

"I'm leaving," Grijpstra said.

"I'll take you out through the back way," Jansen said. "There's too much of a crowd up front today. There's only one set of doors and six lines of customers converge to that point."

"Whoa!" Grijpstra shouted.

Jansen stopped in his tracks.

"Six?" Grijpstra asked.

"Sure, Adjutant—look for yourself. Six registers, right?"

"I counted just five," Grijpstra said. "I didn't see the sixth because it was blocked by that stack of cartons."

"We've got six registers," Jansen said.

"Can I have a minute with you, in your office . . . ?"

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He and the store manager faced each other. "You know," Grijpstra said, "I do believe you were lying to me just now."

"Me?"

"You." Grijpstra tore a cigar from its plastic envelope and lit it. He tried to blow a ring, in vain.

The ragged cloud made Jansen cough.

"Me? Why should I lie?"

"I may seem clever," Grijpstra said cheerfully. "But I had help—professional help from a professor. Did you tell me just now that nothing could be wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," said Jansen.

"Five times right, once wrong," Grijpstra said triumphantly. "Haha. How simple."

"I don't follow, Adjutant."

Grijpstra observed the moist end of his cigar. "Yes."

"You claim I'm a crook, Adjutant?"

"Only a suspicion," Grijpstra said. "I suspect you of murder. You're under arrest. Don't say anything from here on if you don't want to say anything from here on. Whatever you say now may be evidence against you. You can phone your lawyer, later on, from my office. Take off your dustcoat and put on your jacket. We'll be going."

"Murder?" Jansen whispered.

"I'm sorry," Grijpstra said. "I suspect you of embezzlement, too, of course. I forgot that for a moment because embezzlement is something else. I work for Murder. You see, there are six registers here, but only five connect to your computer. That will be proven in due course by an expert, an electrician I suppose."

Jansen smiled. "What nonsense, Adjutant."

"You have another solution?" Grijpstra asked. "One sixth of your turnover never reaches the terminal. What does it reach, if not your pocket? It has to go somewhere and you're in charge."

"And the murder?" Jansen asked.

"In May," Grijpstra said. "You were on holiday."

"Correct."

"Mallorca?"

"No," Jansen said, "hiking, here in Holland."

"Alone?" Grijpstra asked. "With a backpack? Surrounded by nature? You slept in a tent? A trip we can't check on?"

"Indeed."

"You were in Mallorca," Grijpstra said, "with your accomplice, a man by the name of Gennep. The very same Gennep who didn't file

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his invoices properly. The very same Gennep who bought too many computers for this store. He bought six, connected five."

Jansen was silent.

"Just a minute," Grijpstra said. "*You* were the accomplice. Gennep invented the trick. You were a mere pawn. But he needed you, of course, for you had to empty out that sixth register at the end of the working day. Without you the plan couldn't work. So you got your share. Half, isn't that right?"

"Really," Jansen scoffed.

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Neither was Mr. Gennep," Grijpstra said.

"So?"

"I can see it clearly now," Grijpstra said. "Two bachelors, unfettered by family chains, stealing together. And one glorious day you would both take off, each with half the lot. But it wasn't enough for you, was it? So you kicked your friend Gennep off that cliff. Pointed out the view, Gennep turned away—"

"Home-made riddles," Jansen said, "home-made answers."

Grijpstra got up. "Not at all. The Spanish police made up an accident report. I plan to go to Mallorca myself. You two must have been camping somewhere—there'll be a record. Campings keep names. I'll prove you and Gennep were there together. What did you do with the money?"

"What money?"

"Two point eight million guilders," Grijpstra said patiently, "and a lot more has been added to that meanwhile. Three million by now? There'll be papers in your home. You must have brought dollar-checks and made transfers to foreign banks. There'll be receipts. Maybe you keep accounts on tax-free islands."

"Sit down," Jansen said.

Wasn't he quick? Grijpstra thought. I never saw him take that gun from his drawer.

"Put that down," Grijpstra said firmly. "You're making things worse. Threatening a police officer who's exercising his duty."

Jansen got up and locked the door. The lower part of the door was plywood, the upper part glass. Jansen's pistol was still aimed at Grijpstra. "Into the closet, Adjutant. I'm going to bind and gag you now. We'll be closing soon and you won't be found until the cleaners arrive tomorrow morning. May I have your gun and handcuffs, please?"

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"You may not," Grijpstra said. "You're under arrest and you stay under arrest. Are you quite right in the head?"

Jansen tapped his temple. "Quite sane, thank you. People do underestimate me, however. Take Gennep now. He wanted to go on until we had a total of five million, but that would take too long. I have more than half that now, for we both paid into the same account. I can sign alone and I'll be doing that tomorrow. The true criminal works alone. Once I'm across the border, which will take only a few hours, I'm as free as a bird. Let's have your pistol and your handcuffs now."

"Shall I tell you something?" Grijpstra asked. "You may pretend what you like, but you really wanted to be arrested."

Jansen stared.

"You didn't even know that yourself, did you now?"

Jansen kept staring.

"Listen. Didn't you draw my attention to the sixth register yourself? Hadn't I told you already I was fascinated by the figure six?"

Jansen gaped.

"Subconscious guilt feelings," Grijpstra said. "We see it all the time. Suspects move themselves straight into our hands. Now put that pistol down and follow me."

"I'll have to kill you," Jansen whispered. "You leave me no choice. I'd rather not, but if I do there's no risk. The pistol doesn't make too much of a bang and it's noisy in the store now—no one will notice. Last chance, Adjutant, your weapon and your cuffs. I'm not going to fight you, I can kill you from behind my desk."

"No," Grijpstra said.

Jansen leveled his pistol.

There was a knock on the door.

"Not now," Jansen shouted.

Someone rattled the doorknob.

"Go away," Jansen shouted.

De Gier came through the door, following his raised foot that had splintered glass and plywood.

"Careful!" Grijpstra shouted.

De Gier wasn't careful. He jumped on top of Jansen. His left arm knocked up Jansen's right. The pistol fired at the ceiling. De Gier grabbed Jansen's arms and twisted them together. Handcuffs clicked. "You're under arrest."

"He's been under arrest for a while now," Grijpstra said. "What kept you so long?"

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De Gier picked up the gun, shook out the clip, and dropped both parts into his pocket. He picked up the suspect and put him on a chair.

"Complications delayed me. The bum in the harbor had been beaten up by other bums. I had to find the others. There were witnesses, but they kept wandering off. It's all tied up and taken care of now. Sorry, Adjutant."

"Bah," Grijpstra said, "I counted on you."

"You can't count on anything," de Gier said. "You should know that by now."

"Aren't we great?" de Gier asked, leaning against the counter of a bar in the inner city. "Complaint received in the morning, suspect arrested in the late afternoon. Unheard of these days, but we took it in our stride."

"No," Grijpstra said. "That'll be two more jenevars, bartender, please."

"I'm closing," the bartender said, "and as you're what you are you'll be taking your time. Two more and that's it."

"How do you mean, no?" de Gier asked Grijpstra.

Grijpstra drank and ordered two more. "Armed and threatening suspects should be talked at, not jumped. A quiet conversation usually leads to a complete confession."

"I was just in time," said de Gier.

"They never shoot at me," Grijpstra said. "I'm too nice. The professor thought so, too. I'll be having dinner with her tomorrow."

"Tell me about the professor."

Grijpstra explained.

"Wow," de Gier said sadly. "Then what will you do? After dinner, I mean?"

"Coffee?" Grijpstra asked. "Cognac, perhaps? Help her wash up? Help her keep her distance?"

"You'll be chaotic again," de Gier said enviously. "You can do that so well. If you keep that up, you'll dance away from your own fate. True existence is true illusion and you're the only one I know who has learned to ignore what circumstances seem to be offering for free. Or am I idealizing you again?"

"You better not drive home," the bartender said.

"But don't you *see?*" the drunken sergeant asked. "If we can undo logic, like the adjutant will do when he refuses the beautiful professor, we free ourselves from self-inflicted chains and—"

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"I'll have one, too," the bartender said. "Just let me lock the door."

"The wise," the sergeant said, "only *seem* to behave unwisely, but—"

"I'm truly unwise," Grijpstra said sadly. "We'll have three more."

De Gier was mumbling. "To undo logic—to refuse fate's gifts, to accept chance—if only we dared."

"Three more," the bartender said, getting them.

"Common sense," Grijpstra said, "is my only motivation. To see what's what. The professor is so beautiful. I will not drag her down to my level."

"Poor Grijpstra."

"No, no—you see that wrong. On the contrary. When I'm alone, I'm safe. Strengthened by common sense, following the line of logic, adhering to the law, reasoning clearly, moving in a straight direction, reaching B from A—"

"You really think you're doing that?"

"I do." Grijpstra smiled modestly. "But I do need help from time to time, by people with more sense, like that graceful professor—by you even. You're so quick." Grijpstra sighed. "She presented me with the figure six."

They stumbled home together. It was early in the morning. There was no one about. "To be certain is good," Grijpstra said. "I'm certain at times. Like now. Nothing can happen to us now. When emptiness surrounds me, there can be no threat. I so like to be sure. To go home in a void. Can you follow me so far?"

"No," de Gier said. "And I don't agree, either. The chaos is all around us. Anything can happen—and it will, as you'll see."

Grijpstra pulled his arm out of de Gier's. It was time to say goodbye. He stumbled and embraced a lamppost. His feet slid away and he pulled the lamppost toward him. The lamppost fell on top of Grijpstra.

"What?" the commissaris asked the next morning.

"The lamppost fell on top of Grijpstra, sir," de Gier said.

"The adjutant was drunk and failed to step aside. The lamppost was quite heavy. Grijpstra suffered three bruised ribs. The ambulance picked him up."

"And?"

"He's in the hospital, sir, doing fairly well."

"Lampposts don't fall over," the commisaris said.

"This one did, sir. Dogs, you know?"

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"Hm?" the commisaris asked.

"Urinating," de Gier said.

"Are you withholding information?"

"I do believe in the unexpected," the sergeant said, "although there's always a reason to be found afterward. Factors combine in an unpredictable pattern, but there will be a connection if you follow the pattern in reverse. There are a lot of dogs in that particular part of the city and they all seem to prefer that particular post. Urine contains acid, and enough acid will eat through the heaviest metal. It can take awhile—in this case, a hundred years perhaps—but once the adjutant grabbed that particular post at that particular moment he had to bruise three ribs."

The commissaris began to smile. "I see your point. Our very own Grijpstra comes along, believing only in the obvious, but behind the obvious hides the non-obvious, and it's just as true." The commissaris laughed.

De Gier frowned furiously.

"Poor Grijpstra," the commissaris said, "but he did solve his case."

"By chance," de Gier said.

"And perseverance," said the commissaris.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

INCOMPLETE PASS

by MARK GRENIER

Said a bogus-check passer named Draper,
When the cops foiled the guy's latest caper,
"I'm chagrined, it is true,
That my plan's fallen through—
But it certainly looked good on paper."

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"Running Lovers" was judged the best short story in a contest sponsored by the Southern California chapter of the Mystery Writers of America at a seminar in November 1984. Congratulations all around. . .

RUNNING LOVERS

by HELEN JUAREZ PHIPPS

For more than an hour, Inez had been sitting motionless in the antique Spanish chair with its rigid back and the worn carving of the smiling cupids. She had dragged that chair with her from gallery to gallery, from New York to Venice to Cannes, and finally to the *Galeria Perdida* in the hotel in Mexico City's *zona rosa.*

She sat like an aging doll, a *muneca,* white-faced with painted cheeks, from one of the scenes of Yucatan that hung on the wall behind her, her body stiff in a high-necked black-jersey dress that hung loosely on her once well rounded figure—the figure of a *concierge,* her husband Paul unkindly called it—her small feet with ankles crossed, her toes reaching back and just touching the rung of the chair.

The French girl, Lolette, waiting for customers in the small drawing salon out front, no doubt thought she was dozing, as she had been wont to do lately when traffic in the galleries was slow. But not only was she not asleep, Inez knew exactly what she herself looked like—her straight back, rigid as the chair in which she sat, undefeated, though worn as the faded velvet backing. Her head, a little to the side, rested against her hand. The strong slender fingers cupped halfway about her eyes shut out the intermittent swirls of neon and chrome that reflected through the archway from the contemporary gallery but did not cut off the view of the larger-than-life figures of the "Running Lovers" in cast aluminum that partially blocked her office door.

She loved the figures for the grandeur, for their simplicity of form, and for the fact that they were running. Running from what? Or from whom? The artist's concept continually intrigued her.

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The torsos of the sculptured pair were bare, undefined by male or female organs, and they had no features—no ears, no fingers. Yet there was no mistaking their potency, their abundant sensual grace.

She had placed them there herself in such a way that she could see around them yet not be seen too readily when she was in her office alone. She didn't want to be a spy, but with a husband like hers and a girl like Lolette she had no choice.

Today in the central gallery there were no serious connoisseurs, only rain-dampened tourists moving slowly from sculpture to sculpture, more attentive to the smaller water colors on the east wall, browsing, waiting for the rain to stop, leaving wet footprints on the tiles.

Inez could see that Lolette, sitting in the giant plastic hand that served as a chair, paid no more attention to them than she did to the mariachis who were looking in on her through the window. The girl was intent on the embroidery she was stitching on a blouse, her eyes on her handwork except for an occasional glance at the clock.

Ten minutes before her assigned time to leave for lunch, Lolette set her stitchery aside and slipped out the side door. The tourists signed the guest book and left.

More alert with the girl out of the way, Inez breathed easier. She shifted her chair so she could watch the outer door.

Her husband Paul was very late. He always came in an hour before lunchtime to check on the progress of the gallery sales. Inez made a forest of circles and crosses on her blotter with her enameled pen. If Paul delayed much longer, there was a chance he might run into her son, Miguel, her well kept secret. What if Paul should find out she had a son? For the moment, the idea amused her. The contrast between the two men—a collision course. Then she began to worry. It would never do to show her hand. And there was a faint hope that Paul might tire of Lolette. Then she could dispense with her plan altogether. But the hope was slight. She tucked the thought back into the darkest compartment of her mind where she had buried all her dreams.

The revolving door from the street pushed in a blast of winter air. Inez drew a fringed shawl about her shoulders and stayed in her chair as Paul hurried into the gallery. Attaché case swinging, mouse-colored gloves on his hands to match his hat, his dark suit with the wide lapels, six small buttons on each cuff, immaculate as always.

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Out of breath, puffing. He was running late. The thick carpet in front of the amorous sculptured figures muffled his footsteps.

The odor of violets preceded him, expanded, and filled the room. The perfunctory greeting, the quick, nervous, guilty tread as he moved closer to the mirror with the ormolu frame, a light brushing of her forehead with his lips. Then he stood back courteously and, with a sideward glance toward the mirror, removed his hat. Self-consciously, he removed a glove and began smoothing back the disordered strands of his hair.

"Are you lunching alone?" Inez asked in an offhand manner.

"No," he said. "Some people from the embassy. I'll bring them around to the gallery one of these days. I'm working on them slowly."

His nerve ends are showing, Inez thought. He lies badly. He hasn't learned yet. "We need action here," she said. "Business has been dropping off." She rifled through some papers on her desk. "Incidentally—" she felt herself coloring unpleasantly "—this new girl has got to go."

"The new girl?" He didn't flinch. Inez admired his restraint.

"Lolette, the little French one you hired. She has no working papers. She can't be employed in Mexico. It's the rule."

"Oh, you can fake that," he said. "She really needs the job, Inez."

"Then why doesn't she work harder? She spent the morning sewing on a blouse. She ignored the customers."

"Speak to her," he said. "It's your place to tell her what to do."

"You'll have to. She goes deaf and dumb when I try to tell her anything."

"She understands. You've always been able to make it very clear what you want. In any language." He was putting back on his gloves. "Don't be hard on her, Inez. She's very young and vulnerable."

Young and vulnerable. Of all the things for him to say. Had he forgotten that she herself was once young and vulnerable? A wave of fury once again diffused the blood to her glazed-white face. An overhead mobile began whirling, like her thoughts. "A vacation—" she heard him saying. "That's the ticket. Why don't you hop on a boat to London? Go to Sotheby's, Zurich, the art auctions? I'll give you a letter of credit. You can buy all the paintings you want. Do you a world of good. How does that sound to you?"

He would never say the right thing. Inez watched him as he settled his hat squarely above his ears. He had just signed his own death warrant. "You mean a vacation for me sounds good to you?" she said. "Thank you. I'll stay here."

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"Stay here, then. I'm going out to lunch." He looked at himself in the mirror and straightened his tie, puffing up the windsor knot. He adjusted the brim of his hat, flipping it to a jaunty angle.

He looks so young with his hat on, Inez thought. Assured, arrogant, he has the world in his hand when his bald spot is covered.

Abruptly, he said goodbye, once again adjusting the brim of his hat. There was no turning back. She had to go through with her plan.

Inez felt better when her eyes were closed, her senses sharpened and her antennae turned to what people were saying. She had always possessed unusual hearing abilities—she could hear beyond the boundaries of her office, and sometimes, she felt, even beyond the gallery's outer walls.

Right now she could hear the words of apology Paul was whispering into Lolette's ear. He was sorry to be late for their midday rendezvous. Their favorite spot, the restaurant they frequented most often, was the Candide in the Niza district across from the American embassy, upstairs. She could hear the pop of the cork when the waiter opened the pale, crackling wine and poured it from a frosted crock. She could hear the lovers toast each other and their futures. She was glad she could not see the expression in their eyes.

Listening intently, she caught the hush of their footsteps after lunch as they crossed the green medallioned carpet and entered the lavishly draped room with the Empire bed, Maximillian's gift to Mexican decor, extensively copied in the best bordellos and the most fashionable Mexican homes. Their talk was serious now, not loving. Inez knew they were discussing her. Lolette would not be kind, but she hoped that Paul, after so many years, would come to her defense.

But no—she could hear him say it again. A trip. "I'll send the old girl to Europe—the auctions, Venice, a touch of the Marbella sun. It would do her a world of good and give us time."

"Time?" Lolette's jade cat eyes would enlarge with tears. "If you send her away, there's just that much less real time for us. *Marry* me. Tell her you're going to *marry* me." Oh, yes, those were Lolette's words—Marry me, marry me, repeated weekly, daily, in an endless chant. Inez could hear her say the words as if the girl were in the next room. Why didn't Paul tire of her demands? He always had, before.

But the arguing had stopped. The Empire bed was waiting.

Inez closed her eyes and picked up the ivory phone on her desk.

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"A small filet," she ordered, "mushrooms, and a light salad. No—no sauce, nothing as heavy as what you served them. A slice of papaya, perhaps. And coffee, a carafe—very hot. Thank you, my dear. If you have the time, bring it yourself, in a cab. I'll pay."

A good waiter—her son, Miguel. He was a good boy, cooperative, undemanding. Miguel would do anything for her. And why not? She was the only parent he had ever had. His father had abandoned the two of them even before the boy had been born. Miguel had never questioned her actions, or her motives. He had understood why she had to leave him in the village when she went off to look for a husband abroad. She had left him to be raised by her own people. She knew he would be happier that way than if she had hauled him around with her. By the time she had found Paul, she knew she had not found a father for her fatherless son. So she and Miguel, child of her heart, had promised each other that Paul would never know about his stepson. They had kept it a secret between them, and Inez had promised Miguel that she would take care of him as long as he would never attempt to see her unless she sent for him.

She looked at her watch with the cameo band. It was early. Miguel had three hours before the rush.

It was too bad her natural son couldn't have achieved more with his life, but as a waiter in the Candide he had no further aspirations—it was still Mexico City's best restaurant. As his father's son, he could have done worse. Paul would never have allowed a son of his to start out life in such a lowly station, but then Paul had never known Miguel, nor Miguel's father—a man filled with bitterness and hate—Miguel's heritage.

And now it was time at last for mother and son to be together. She had reached her decision before Miguel, carrying the heavy steam tray, walked through the gallery door.

"*Amorcito,* my dear love, this way." She led him back to her office.

"You're taking a chance," he said. "The girl might recognize me. She'll be coming back any time. They finished lunch within the hour."

Inez smiled at his innocence. "They will not be back for quite some time. We're not going to worry about them now, are we?"

"You've made up your mind to it, then?" He set the steam tray on the floor beside her desk and took out the silver-hooded plates.

Inez picked up the cover of a dish and inhaled the delicious essence

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of mushrooms and Madeira and herbs. "It is only a matter of when," she said. She set back the cover.

"They'll be in for lunch tomorrow," Miguel said. "They've already made their reservations. Two o'clock. My table."

"Then see to it they order something with a spicy sauce—a curry or a *mole*. Anything that will disguise the flavor." Inez went to a desk drawer and rummaged through it until she found the packet she was seeking. "It works slowly. They will be far from the restaurant when it happens—and too sick to call for help. There will be no way to implicate you. No one knows who you are." She handed the small paper envelope to Miguel."

"No tip?" Her son looked at her and smiled.

"When it's over. I'll pay you then." Inez sat down at the desk and again lifted the warming tray cover from her steak. "Florence would be a nice place for a gallery—or a little shop along the Arno. Plan to meet me there."

The steam from the dish swirled about her hand. Her eyes closed again. She was suddenly very tired. Miguel poured her coffee, unfolded her napkin, and set it on her lap. As he left with the steam tray, he accidentally brushed up against the "Running Lovers" and there was the sound of metal upon metal.

The poison would work inside them with infinitesimal, feathered strokes. It bothered her to think about it. It might take days for it to eat its way, like an insidious worm, ever so gently, so persistently, into their beautifully healthy, strong insides. The effect would be very subtle. Days later, all antibodies destroyed, it would then explode and course through their veins. She opened her eyes abruptly. She was suddenly very hungry.

The waiter at station twenty-one was very solicitous when the gentleman at the table shoved aside his plate of Chicken Mole and appeared to be suffering a stroke. To the young Frenchwoman sitting across the table from the suddenly very sick man, he said, "Your friend appears to be very ill. Perhaps the sauce was too piquant. Under the circumstances, it could be very difficult for you, a foreigner in our country. The police investigations are very severe, they ask all sorts of questions—"

The young woman looked at him in sudden panic.

"But if you leave, pronto, even before the doctor or the police—" she was looking very frightened "—get away from here as soon as

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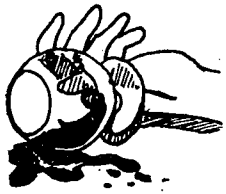
you can. Then take the boat for Italy. They will watch the airport. They will not look for you aboard a ship."

He drew back her chair and helped her from the table. "I happen to be going to open a gallery in Florence along the Arno. My mother is very old, she will not be able to look after it properly. She will not last very long. But you have the experience. Hurry, before the captain calls the police. That's a good girl. *Hasta luego.* I will see you soon in Florence. It will be beautiful."



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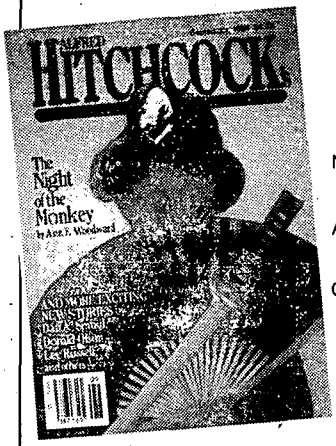

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a *NEW* short story by

RUTH RENDELL

Finding things in the vacation flats wasn't unusual. People were very careless. They rented these flats at Juanillo Beach for a couple of weeks in the high season and went off home to New Jersey or Moscow, Idaho, or wherever it might be, leaving their jewelry behind and their cameras, not to mention such trifles as books and tapes and so on . . .

THE WHISTLER

by RUTH RENDELL

Jeremy found the key in one of the vacation flats while he was working for Manuel. The flats were being painted throughout in a color called champagne and so far they hadn't found a machine to do this. Jeremy hoped they wouldn't until the job was done. Manuel was an American citizen, though he came from somewhere south of the border—Cuba, Jeremy had always supposed. Jeremy himself came from somewhere a long way north of the border—England, in fact—and he had been feeling his way around the United States for a couple of years now, always hoping for his luck to change. The key, he thought, might be a piece of luck.

It was up in a corner of the bedroom windowsill, under the blind. Manuel was in the living room, whistling country music. He whistled all the time he was working—never anything Spanish, always western or country stuff—and he never played the radio, which Jeremy would have preferred. The key had a label tied on its head with a piece of string. On the label an address was written. Jeremy started to say, or thought of saying, "Hey, Manuel, look at this—" and then checked himself. The whistling went on unbroken. Whatever might be an offer at the address on the key label, did he want to have to

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share it with Manuel? Or, worse, did he want Manuel to take the key off him?

Finding things in the flats wasn't unusual. People were very careless. They rented these flats at Juanillo Beach for a couple of weeks in the high season and went off home to New Jersey or Moscow, Idaho, or wherever it might be, leaving their jewelry behind and their cameras, not to mention such trifles as books and tapes and so on. The company who owned the property was supposed to come in and check before Manuel started but they didn't make much of a job of it. Jeremy had found a roll of banknotes, over eighty dollars, in a kitchen unit, and in a gap between the tiled floor and wall a diamond ring. A jeweler in downtown Miami had given him $250 for the ring and that was probably a fraction of its value. It had been a mistake telling Manuel about it. Manuel hadn't cared about the banknotes but he had jibbed at the ring. It wasn't that he was more honest than the next man, but he had this contract with Juanillo Beach Properties, Inc. and he didn't want to lose it. At any rate, he had warned Jeremy off helping himself to anything he found in the flats—which was enough in itself to make Jeremy pick up the key and put it in the pocket of his jeans. In the next room the whistling continued, becoming very rollicking and Rocky Mountain.

It was starting to get hot and the air-conditioning had broken down. Or Juanillo Beach Properties had taken the fuse out, Jeremy thought. He wouldn't put it past them. By noon it would be up in the nineties. Well, it was for the climate he'd come down here and for the climate he stayed. It is easier to be poor in a warm climate. He thought of England with horror, of being deported and having to go back there as his worst nightmare. It couldn't really be like that, it wasn't, but he remembered his native land as green and cold, full of rich, elderly people who had log fires going all the year round, a land of joblessness and privilege where, though he had been born there, he had never felt welcome. Now the blind was up, he could see the subtropical garden in which the apartment block was—palms and citrus and Indian Paintbrush and oleander, and here and there the sliced spear leaves of a banana. Yellow-and-black-striped zebra butterflies flitted among the thick shiny leaves. And the sun blazed from a clear blue sky. It suited him here—or would if he had a bit of money.

In London he had had a very small room, for which he paid twenty-five pounds a week, and had shared bathroom and kitchen two floors down with four other tenants. Here he had a motel room with

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bath—well, shower—for less than that. And he didn't need a kitchen, because eating out was cheap. But sometimes he thought he'd come to the United States too late to seek his fortune—maybe fifty years too late. That was what Josh who owned the motel said. Josh didn't know he was there illegally, of course. Or if he did he didn't say.

After work, he and Josh sometimes had a beer together on the porch at the rear of the motel office building. The motel was in a rough area and was pretty shabby, but if there was one thing Josh kept in repair it was the screens round that porch. All the mosquitos of the diaspora came down there, Josh said, driven out of more prosperous parts.

Jeremy remembered the address on the key. "Where's Eleventh Avenue?"

There were two more cans of Coors on the table, sweating icy drops, and a bag of toasted pecans. A little brown lizard ran up the screen on the outside.

"What d'you mean, Eleventh Avenue? Eleventh Avenue where?"

"Miami."

"There's not so many cities in this country you'll find the avenues numbered. Streets, yes. Why? What d'you ask for?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Take San Francisco, take L.A., take Philly—there's none of them got numbered avenues."

"New York has."

"New York's different," said Josh, which was something Americans always said, Jeremy had noticed.

"So how about Miami?"

"Sure, Miami's got an Eleventh Avenue. Downtown. There's a street plan in the office."

Jeremy had a look at it. The address on the key was 1562A Ave. 11. Nō city, no state. The label was rather smudged and there had been more of the address there—a couple of capital letters, in fact. The second letter was certainly a J or a Y. Y for York? J for Juanillo? He knew without inquiring that there was no First Avenue in Juanillo, let alone Eleventh. Come to that, could he be sure the writer had meant Eleventh Avenue? Ave. 11 was a funny way of putting it, more a European way, except that Europeans don't number their streets much.

It wasn't likely to be Miami. People from Miami wouldn't rent a flat at Juanillo Beach. But he could try. Burglary would be so simple, scarcely dishonest even, when you didn't have to break in. That evening he was going to eat out with Manuel and Lupe in a Thai

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restaurant out in posh Fort Cayne where Manuel lived. But first he'd make a little trip downtown and try the key on the front door of 1562A Eleventh Avenue.

The place wasn't guarded, all was quiet. He rang the bell, waited; rang again, tried the key. It didn't fit. In the taxi going out to Fort Cayne, he thought about what Josh had said about not many American cities having numbered avenues. Of course Josh might be wrong, he had only named three cities . . . Wasn't it more probable anyway that the key opened an apartment in New York? What was Eleventh Avenue, New York, like and how far uptown would 1562A be? If it was 1562 Fifth they were talking about he'd have some idea. He imagined a gorgeous New York apartment full of treasures waiting for someone to walk in and take. The trouble was that the fare to New York was something around $300 round trip.

The restaurant was called the Phumiphol and it was in one of those glossy malls. Jeremy got there first and ordered a vodka on the rocks. Put it on the check, please. It was going to be a bit awkward meeting Lupe again. Nothing he couldn't handle, of course, but he did need that vodka.

Her real name was Guadelupe or Maria del Guadelupe or some such thing and she was an illegal immigrant like him. A small, dark, beautiful girl with huge eyes and symmetrical features of those Mexican film stars of 'thirties Hollywood. She resembled a photograph he had seen of Dolores del Rio. Manuel was going to marry her and she, too, would become an American, as much a citizen as the President's wife or a Daughter of the American Revolution.

The vodka came and a little dish of something that looked like salted beetles but couldn't be. Jeremy had first met Lupe in Manuel's apartment. Not that she lived there with him. Manuel was very strict and very Spanish about that sort of thing. His affianced wife had to be a virgin and manifestly seen by all the world to be a virgin.

Oddly enough, Lupe had been. Jeremy had never actually come across one before. She lived in a room in a Cuban lady's house and every day she came to clean Manuel's apartment for him and iron his shirts. Manuel put his shirts through the washer himself but Lupe ironed them. Wherever she came from she didn't want to go back there and that, Jeremy had been sure, was why she was waiting on and obeying Manuel in the hope of marrying him. Manuel was an ugly devil, very thin and somehow spiderlike with a pock-marked

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hatchet face, while Jeremy was tall, blond, and good-looking, which was partly, no doubt, why Lupe had fallen in love with him.

Or whatever you called it. At any rate, she hadn't resisted much. Manuel had had to go home because his father was dying. He died before Manuel got there, so he was only away two days but that was enough. Jeremy and Lupe were making love in the apartment at Hacienda Alameda before Manuel got on the plane. Lupe's virginity was a surprise and a bit daunting, but after the third or fourth time it was all the same as if it had been gone five years.

The trouble was that they couldn't stop and at last Manuel found out. One stupid afternoon when Jeremy had the day off and Lupe was cleaning the apartment they forgot discretion and succumbed. They might so easily have gone to the motel, he thought afterward. Manuel didn't find them, nothing so crude as that—he found a blond hair and a long chestnut wavy hair on the pillow where only a black-haired man slept.

Jeremy was finishing off his vodka when Manuel and Lupe came in. Manuel looked cheerful and pleased with himself, talking about the holiday he would take away from Florida when the really hot weather started. Make it a honeymoon was what Jeremy would have said a few months back, they say Alaska's a great place in the summer. Something stopped him saying it now. Manuel hadn't mentioned marriage since that night.

They had some transparent soup with flowers floating in it. A jar of sake and a bottle of Perrier water. Neither Manuel nor Lupe drank much. Then came little pancakes, shredded vegetables, perfumed duck. It was all as if dolls had cooked it. Lupe ate daintily, chewing every mouthful twenty times, keeping her head bent.

"I want to act like a civilized man," Manuel had said, and pathetically, Jeremy thought, "like an American gentleman." He looked ridiculous when he was unhappy, a black crow with mud on its feathers. "My ancestors would have killed you and her, too."

Jeremy had cast up his eyes at that. Oh, Christ . . .

"Times have changed. With me it will be as if it had never happened." Manuel looked at Lupe. "But it must never happen again."

"It won't happen again," said Lupe.

"Of course not." Jeremy didn't want her any more, anyway. All this fuss was enough to put one off more desirable women than Lupe Garcia.

"Then you stay working for me," Manuel said to Jeremy, "and bygones shall be bygones." He smiled. He insisted on shaking Jer-

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emy's hand. Then he went to the kitchen to open a bottle of wine, whistling the "Tennessee Waltz" as he went. An apposite if tactless choice, Jeremy thought, but perhaps Manuel didn't know the words. Lupe tried to catch his eye but Jeremy wouldn't look.

That had been two months ago and this was the first time since then that he had seen Lupe. It was archaic, the feeling the whole setup gave him that, by that one initial act, let alone the others, he had spoiled her for Manuel, she was damaged goods. She had grown more subdued. She didn't look unhappy. They ate little cakes of dough in syrup sauce.

Manuel had his car, though he lived only round the corner. Jeremy was asked back for coffee. He went to the bathroom and saw unmistakable signs of Lupe's occupancy—a jar of skinfood, an eyeliner, a bottle of the cologne she used. It hadn't taken long for Manuel's principles to break down, Jeremy thought with a quiet laugh to himself.

"Yes, I've moved in," she said to him.

He looked at her hand and she saw him looking. Not even an engagement ring.

Manuel drove him home. He had just taken delivery of this year's new car. Jeremy often wondered where the money came from. You didn't own a condominium at prestigious Hacienda Alameda and have a new car every year and fly home to see your family every couple of months out of painting ceilings. It was no business of his. He'd be moving on soon anyway. Maybe to California when he could raise the fare.

The coconut palms round Josh's Motel hummed with tree frogs as if they themselves were sensate things, an unbroken droning that twitched at the nerves. They kept Jeremy awake. He could go to New York instead and try out that key. There were two letters on that label after Ave. 11 and one of them could be a Y. Perhaps there were only two cities in the United States with numbered avenues—and perhaps there were dozens.

A couple of days later he and Manuel moved on into the next apartment. It was the same as the one they had finished except that no one had left a key on the windowsill. Manuel was whistling away in the next room, a song about the sunflowers of Kansas. He had taken off the fancy pale-blue blouson he had been wearing and slung it down over the side of the bath. There was nowhere else to put it. Jeremy felt in the pockets. He had done this before when times were

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hard and hauled himself fifty bucks. Manuel was too careless about money to notice. The whistling continued, only the tune changing and going south to become "The Yellow Rose of Texas." Jeremy pulled out a wad of notes, all of them twenties, a lot of money.

He couldn't just pocket it, that was no good. He looked about him, thinking quickly. The bath plug was the metal kind, operated by a lever underneath the taps but nevertheless removable. Jeremy removed it and carefully poked the roll of notes inside. The roll expanded a little to fit the hole as he had known it would. He put the plug back.

Manuel or he usually went out at lunchtime and fetched back a couple of Whoppers, onion rings, and two Cokes. It was Manuel who always paid. Cutting off the whistling, he went to the bathroom for his jacket and the six or seven dollars Jeremy would need at Burger King. This time he wasn't quite so philosophical about the loss of his money.

"I know you're not accusing me," Jeremy said. "I know you wouldn't do that, but for my own sake I'd like to show you."

He pulled the empty pockets out of his jeans, stripped off his shirt, kicked off his shoes, handed Manuel his own denim jacket with just eight dollars in the pocket. "I don't know how much you had on you, Manuel, but you were swinging that thing around when we got in the car at my place. It's a rough old area round Josh's—"

"And finding's keepings, eh?" Manuel used a lot of quaint old English expressions that sounded crazy uttered in his Spanish accent. "There's worse things happen at sea," he said. "But you must pay for the lunch." He laughed and patted Jeremy on the back.

Jeremy hooked the notes out of the plugholes before he went home. There were sixteen of them, more than enough to get to New York on. But suppose the place the key opened wasn't in New York? He'd have wasted all that money. It was an expensive-looking key, a *classy* key, he thought—shinier, heavier, more trimly cut than the keys that opened Hacienda Alameda.

Manuel went off home the following week and Lupe was alone. There was no way Jeremy was going to get himself involved with her again. He intended to avoid Fort Cayne altogether for the four days Manuel was gone.

She came to him. He was sitting out on the porch with Josh when she drove into the parking lot in Manuel's new car. There was something uncertain and vulnerable in the way she drove, the way she

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parked. She had the lowest self-image of anyone Jeremy knew. Because she thought of herself as dirt people treated her like it, though physically she was obsessively clean, had two showers or baths every day. It was Oriental not Latin girls that have been compared to little flowers, but Lupe reminded one of a flower—a hibiscus maybe.

"I should be so lucky," said Josh.

"Help yourself." Jeremy shrugged. Lupe had opened the screen door and was coming hesitantly up the steps. "There's a new rule here," he said to her, "no members of the opposite sex in guests' rooms after sunset," and he laughed at his own wit.

Her face grew hot. Josh, who usually had a great sense of humor, didn't laugh for some reason but asked her to sit down and how about a drink on the house? Lupe said quietly that she'd have a Coke if there was one. Josh brought the Coke and asked where Manuel was. He had once or twice met Manuel.

"San José," said Lupe.

That did surprise Jeremy. "His mum lives in California? I never knew that."

"Not California—Costa Rica," Josh said. "Isn't that right? The capital of Costa Rica?"

She nodded. Jeremy barely knew where Costa Rica was and cared less. Josh said he'd never been there but he'd heard it didn't have an army and it was the only real democracy in Central America. Lupe hadn't been there, either—Nicaragua was where she came from. They were actually having a conversation. Let's keep it that way, Jeremy thought.

He didn't know if she was devoted to Manuel or only to his money and his citizenship. Whichever it was, she talked about him all the time. He was a devoted son to his mother, he'd bought her a house in the best residential suburb of San José. Lupe had photographs, which she proceeded to show them of a bungalow covered in bougainvillea with gilded bars on its windows.

Jeremy looked at the photographs, which had been done by a professional whose address was stamped on the back. Ave. 2, it said, San José, Costa Rica.

From a bookshop in downtown Miami he managed to get a street plan of San José. It was a city in which the streets or *calles* were numbered, and so were the avenues or *avenidas*. "Ave," of course, could be short for *avenida* as well as avenue. A grid-plan city, more or less, with the avenues running east to west and the *calles* north

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to south. At Juanillo Beach Properties they told him that one of the apartments had last been occupied by a couple from Costa Rica. A lot of Costa Ricans came to Florida for a week or a few days. Shopping was cheaper and better here. Electrical goods, for instance, were half the price they were in San José. But no, they couldn't give him the address. If he had found something in the flat, let them have it and they'd send it on. Jeremy handed over a couple of rolls of film he'd bought just now at Gray Drug. The Juanillo Beach Properties girl looked at him as if he was out of his mind.

The travel agent he went to could get him a three-day package to San José for a lot less than he'd nicked off Manuel. Manuel was back by now and they were on the last apartment in the block. When Jeremy said he'd like next week off, Manuel didn't put up any objections and seemed interested when he said he was going to New York. He smiled and patted Jeremy's shoulder and said something about the Big Apple and, in a funny old-fashioned phrase, not to do anything he, Manuel, wouldn't do. Then he took a clean brush and the bucket of emulsion and went off into the bedroom, whistling that song about a boy called Sue.

Jeremy got there in the late afternoon. There were more Costa Ricans than Americans on the flight, and when the captain announced they were beginning their descent for San José they all clapped and cheered and drummed their feet. Evidently they were a patriotic lot.

A bus the tour company had laid on took him into the city. It was four thousand feet up and cooler than Florida, though a lot nearer the Equator. There was a view of blue mountains behind coffee plantations and banana groves, and the whole was dotted with Flame of the Forest trees like points of fire. Jeremy had seen a bit of the Third World one way and another, and immediately outside the city he expected to see the shantytowns of poverty, the huts made of tin and sacks and plastic bags, the rubbish tips and flies. Poverty didn't bother him—he never thought about it—but here in a kind of subconscious way he expected to see it, just as in his native land he expected rain and Tudor mansions. But there was none to be seen. Only neat stucco bungalows and little houses like on an English council estate.

In case the plan had lied, it was a comfort to see the *avenidas*. The Hotel Latinoamericana was on Avenida Central and if it wasn't exactly the Hilton it was the best hotel Jeremy had ever stayed in

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and about five stars up on Josh's. The dark came down at six o'clock. Carmen, the tour guide, had warned them about pickpockets in the city, where thieves abounded. Jeremy thought he would have an early night. San José did, anyway, the hotel bar closing at ten sharp.

In the morning, he swam in the hotel pool. The water was icy. Outside, in the Avenida Central, the atmosphere was thick and stinking with petrol fumes. He walked downtown a bit, but the pollution which hung as blue smog and obscured the mountains made him cough. Another thing Carmen had said was that if you took a taxi you should settle the fare with the driver first. Jeremy found a taxi and haggled a bit, but he had no Spanish and the driver hardly any English and when he had seated himself in the back he was fairly certain he'd be ripped off. The driver was going to take him on a city tour.

First they went to that suburb on the road to Irazu where the finest houses were and the foreign embassies. It wasn't Avenida 11 nor was Manuel's mother's house to be seen. The driver pointed out places of interest that Jeremy wasn't interested in. He showed him the university and the museum of art and then, not far from the children's hospital, Jeremy did see a bungalow very like Manuel's mother's, perhaps indeed the very one, with orange bougainvillea swarming all over it, a golden grille to keep out the burglars, and a little white dog peering out of one of the windows. At one point they actually drove along Avenida 11 but nowhere near number 1562. It wasn't far from the Latinoamericana, though—he could easily walk there.

After dark? That might be best. Or should he watch the house or flat or whatever it was for the occupants to go out? He remembered that, after all, he had only two days. He paid the taxi driver—twice, it seemed to him, what they had fixed on—and walked up the Calle Central to Avenida 11. There were two branches of it, the street being broken rather ominously by the Central Prison.

When he found the house, he was deeply disappointed. It wasn't even up to the standard of Manuel's mother's place—far below it, in fact. He thought of where his parents lived in London, in North Finchley. This bungalow, standing alone on the side of the road, might itself have been in North Finchley but for the two palm trees in front of it and the thorn hedge with red flowers that divided it from the abandoned lot stacked with empty oil drums next door.

Lace curtains, none too clean, hung at all the windows. The paint

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was faded. It looked unoccupied but he didn't dare try the key. He walked across the oil-drum lot and looked round the back. Everything shut up. An empty doghouse and a broken rusty dog chain.

He found a McDonald's and lunched there. The unaccustomed high altitude was tiring and after a few drinks in the hotel bar he slept. By six-thirty it was quite dark. He walked up the Calle Central onto Avenida 11 and back to the bungalow. It was in darkness, not a light on in the place. The traffic was beginning to thin and with it the smog so that it was possible now to see the stars and a wire-thin curve of moon. He stood on the opposite side of the street and watched the house. For a quarter of an hour he did that, then he went round the back across the oil-drum lot and looked around the rear. Nothing. No one. Darkness.

There were fewer people on the street now. He walked away, as far as the zoo, then back again along a nearly deserted street, breathing clean fresh air. The house looked just the same. He took the key out of his pocket, walked up to the front door, and inserted it in the lock. The door opened easily.

He closed it behind him and stood in the small square hall. The place smelt dusty, stuffy, breath-catching, as places do that have been shut up a long time in a warm dry climate. Not only was it unoccupied now, it had been unoccupied for months.

A little light came in from the street, but not enough. Jeremy switched on his flashlight. He pushed open a door and found himself in a bedroom, insufferably stuffy, smelling of camphor. By the marks on the walls he could see that pieces of furniture had been removed from it and only the big bed with a carved mahogany headboard and white-lace cover remained. The bungalow was a sizable house, much bigger than it seemed from outside. There were two more bedrooms, one empty of furniture. Either the traffic on Avenida 11 had ceased or you couldn't hear it in here. He moved through the rooms in dim musty silence, directing the beam of the flashlight across walls and floors.

The front room was also half furnished. There had been a piano or chest of drawers up against one wall. Shabby wooden-armed chairs stood around. The wallpaper was stained and yellow, imprinted with small paler rectangles where framed photographs had once hung. One still remained, hanging crookedly—a family group.

There was nothing worth taking. The most valuable thing was probably the hand-crocheted lace bed-spread which, when he looked at it again, turned out to be scored by the depredations of moths.

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He returned to the living room. There was a drawer in the table which he didn't expect to contain the family silver or wads of whatever they called their currency, but he might as well look. It didn't. He was right. The drawer had two paper table napkins in it and a United States ten-cent piece, a dime. Closing the drawer, he raised the beam of the flashlight and it fell on the single framed photograph. Something made Jeremy look more closely, bringing the light right up to the glass.

He gasped as if a hand had fallen on his shoulder. The picture was of an old wrinkle-faced man and a stout old woman with three young men standing behind them—one of them spidery thin, very dark and sharp-featured. Jeremy looked and shut his eyes and looked again. He thought, I have to get out of here and fast. It may be too late. There may be someone in the house now, he may have been here all the time, one of those brothers . . .

He put out the flashlight. He listened. There was only the dark dusty silence. He went out into the hall, his heart beating quickly, sweat standing on his forehead. When he opened the front door . . . But he dared not open it. A window? The back way was obviously the worst idea. It was dark, desolate, empty at the rear. Though Avenida 11 seemed deserted, the front door was still his best bet. He ought to have a weapon. A poker? It was never cold enough in this country to have a fire.

He groped his way into the kitchen, opened the door, and yelled aloud, clamping his hand too late over his mouth. —Something tall and thin was standing in an embrasure of the wall between sink and cupboard. He didn't know what he'd imagined, but when he shone the flashlight on it he saw it was a six-foot-tall houseplant in a tub, dried-up, brown, dead. There was a piece of iron pipe with a tap on it lying on the draining board. Jeremy took it with him.

Gripping his weapon in his right hand, he opened the front door with his left. There was no one there—no sound, no still or moving shadow. A car with only low beams on cruised slowly down Avenida 11 and turned into a side street. The ten minutes it took Jeremy to get out of the neighborhood and find a taxi were some of the worst he had ever spent. He knew one of Manuel's brothers had to be lying in wait for him in a doorway or else following him until he reached a totally dark and secluded part of the road.

The house he had been in had obviously once been the home of Manuel's parents. It was probably now up for sale. Manuel had, of course, moved his mother somewhere more plush. Jeremy could see

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it all, how he had been led here, but he didn't let himself think too much about the ins and outs of it until at last a taxi came and he was safely in it. No haggling about fares this time.

Why had Manuel done it? Because Jeremy had stolen $300 from him, no doubt. Anyway, it hadn't come off. Perhaps he had gone to the house in Avenida 11 earlier or later than they'd expected or one of those brothers had got the date wrong. Or it might even be that Manuel's desire to get his own back would be satisfied by Jeremy's disappointment at finding nothing to steal in the house. For Manuel might only be hoaxing him, merely playing a *joke*.

Jeremy felt relieved at this idea. If Manuel's aim had simply been to teach him a lesson—well, that was okay with him. He'd been taught a lesson. If he ever saw another key lying about, he'd leave it where it was. But his fear was ebbing with every turn the taxi took to bring him nearer the Latinoamericana. It was all right, he was safe now, he could even see the funny side of it—the irony of getting nothing out of the burgled house but an old iron tap.

At the desk, he asked for his key. The reception clerk said Jeremy hadn't handed it in, so Jeremy felt in his pockets but it wasn't there. He had a hollow feeling first that he had had the key and his pocket had been picked, then that someone must have come into the hotel while he was out and taken the key from the pigeonhole. It could very easily be done by reaching across the end of the counter while the clerk had his back turned or was attending to another guest.

The clerk found a second key to his room and sent the wizened old bellboy up with him. The door was locked. The bellboy bent over and picked something up from the floor, something that had been half hidden by the bottom of the door.

"Here is your key, senor."

Jeremy was beginning to hate the sight of keys. He sent the man away. Was it possible he had dropped the key there himself?

As soon as he was inside, he knew there was no question of that. The room had been turned upside down. What he had planned to do, he thought, they had done to him.

He sat down in the wicker chair and surveyed the mess. His bedding was in a heap, the mattress doubled over and half on the floor. All the drawers in the dressing table-cum-writing desk had been pulled out. He hadn't brought much luggage with him, a zipper bag only, but they had taken everything out of it and strewn the contents—spare pair of jeans, sweat shirt, spongebag, half bottle of

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duty-free Kahlua—across the floor. But nothing had been damaged or destroyed. There was nothing missing. Or was there?

An empty envelope lay half under the sweat shirt. Jeremy read what was written on it and remembered. *Fond thoughts from Lupe.* He had told her that wasn't the way to write it. You should say *Love from* or *Best wishes from.* Inside had been a cassette of Latin-American love songs—awful stuff he'd never even bothered to take out of the zipper bag he'd had with him that weekend at Hacienda Alameda . . .

And obviously he never had taken it out. He had repacked the bag with the cassette—wrapped in red tissue paper, he recalled, sealed in this envelope—still inside. Well, if it was that tape they wanted, they were welcome to it. But why should they want it?

Jeremy hauled the mattress back onto the bed. He felt horribly uneasy. His hands shook and a muscle twitched in his forehead. He could have done with a drink but the bar closed at ten and it was past that. He pulled the stopper off the Kahlua bottle and then thought: suppose they put something in it?

Had the whole exercise been mounted simply to get back a tape Lupe had given him? No, of course not. It wasn't being done because he'd stolen the $300 either, he saw that now. It was because he'd stolen Lupe. Manuel had probably *meant* him to steal the money, had indeed set it up. It wasn't normal for a man, however well off, to be quite so careless with cash as that or so indifferent to its loss.

Jeremy was too frightened now not to drink the Kahlua. It enabled him to get some sleep. First, though, he pulled the heavy writing desk across the door.

A sound he thought came from in the room awakened him and he jumped up with a cry, but it wasn't in the room, it was outside in the corridor—the people next door coming in late. A Kahlua hangover began to bash his head. He had no aspirin and dared not leave the room to go and ask for some.

Thank God he was going back to Miami today. He didn't leave the hotel. He breakfasted in the dining room, despite the cost, and sat for the rest of the morning on the leather settee facing reception and reading one of the few books in English the Latinoamericana had, a James M. Cain paperback. Nothing untoward happened.

He jumped out of his skin when a voice uttered his name into his ear, but it was only Carmen, the tour guide.

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"The bus for the international airport is going thirteen hundred hours. Have a nice day!"

Could he go back and work for Manuel again? The chances were Manuel wouldn't say a word—would want bygones to be bygones, in his own phrase. Jeremy thought he'd work for him just long enough to get the fare together for California.

It was a long three hours before the bus came. He'd finished *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and was reduced to reading travel brochures. He didn't bother with lunch. It was only something else that cost money.

Nobody drummed feet or clapped when the aircraft began its descent for Miami. But Jeremy felt a lightening of his heart. For one thing, Immigration would doubtless allow him a further six months' stay in the United States. His last six months' allowance had long since expired, but he'd torn the slip out of his passport and would say it had fallen out and got lost. That was a trick he'd used successfully coming over the border from Mexico once before. Feeling you were legal even for a little while gave you a sense of security.

He walked into Customs. They tended to search young people coming in after a short stay in Central or South America, Josh had told him, so he wasn't concerned when the Customs man took everything out of the zipper bag and only mildly surprised at the close examination his spongebag was subjected to.

There was a split in the bottom seam. The Customs man put his fingers through, then his whole hand, and drew out from between cover and lining a package wrapped in red tissue paper. The red tissue, which he'd last seen round Lupe's cassette, unfolded to reveal its contents, a fine white crystalline powder.

Jeremy had never seen it before, but he knew what it was. He thought briefly of the annual new car, of Hacienda Alameda, and then he thought of himself and how he need not worry about his stay in the United States being curtailed. He would be there a long time.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER LOVESEY

The summer of 1944. Wartime England. But the buzzbombs held no fear for 505918 Gorman, Private E. His enemy wasn't Hitler; it was the redcaps. He couldn't stand the Army. The snag was that he was no more of a success at deserting than he was at rifle drill. . .

PRIVATE GORMAN'S LUCK

by PETER LOVESEY

As Private Gorman saw it, he was dead unlucky. He had just been picked up by the redcaps for the seventh time. He couldn't stand the Army. The snag was that he was no more of a success at deserting than he was at rifle drill. On four occasions he had got only a couple of miles from the barracks gates. Twice they had collected him from his home in Bermondsey. But the latest attempt was his most ambitious. He had managed three days on the run and all but got away. His assessment of the experience in the quiet of his cell in Hounslow Barracks was that only his stinking luck had let him down.

At first, fortune had favored him. After two nights sleeping rough, his uniform had got too shabby to wear with confidence, so he had started to look for some civvies. He was passing a bombsite in Hounslow when he spotted a damaged house across the street. It was like looking into a doll's house; the blast had ripped away the entire front. The wardens had cleared the floor downstairs, but the upper floor was unsafe, so everything was left: two bedrooms with beds, chests of drawers, wardrobes, dressing tables, and—of surpassing interest to Gorman—a blue double-breasted suit on a hanger suspended from the top of the wardrobe doors.

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That evening in the blackout (as he told it later to Private Plumridge, who was on fatigues in the guardroom), Gorman had gone back to the house and waited nearby for an air raid to create a distraction. This was the summer of 1944, when the flying bombs were at their worst, so there was a fair chance of the siren going sometime. When it did, and Gorman heard the steady drone of a V1 coming over from London, he made his move. The buzzbombs held no fears for Gorman. He had a firm conviction that he was safe from those things, however close they came. His enemy wasn't Hitler; it was the redcaps. He hopped over the rubble, through the path cleared by the wardens, into the dining room, out to the hall, and up the stairs. As easy as ABC.

For the first time in his Army career, he was glad of his metal-studded boots when he got up there and found the bedroom door locked by some security-minded bastard from the rescue services. Two good kicks and he was inside.

Then it was a matter of keeping close to the wall and edging around the room to the dark shape of the wardrobe. He stepped deftly over one of the fallen chairs, sidled past the dressing table, and reached out his fingertips to feel for the suit. With his hand firmly over the padded shoulder, he lifted it from the wardrobe and held it against his chest. The sleeve-length matched his arm to perfection. Elated, he started back around the edge of the room, blundered into the chair, went arse over tip (as he put it to Private Plumridge), and plunged alarmingly to the floor.

There was a short, uncomfortable hiatus, not unlike the seconds after a flying bomb cuts out, when Private Gorman waited for the crash. It started as a rending sound in the plaster, followed by a crack and a groan as the entire floor caved in. Gorman dropped, yelling, with a mass of wood, plaster, and linoleum. His first thought was that the entire building would collapse on him.

After the fall, he heard himself spluttering, so he reckoned he was still alive. Most of his body had hit the mattress of the double bed. One of his legs hurt and he couldn't breathe for plaster in the air, but he was able to get up. Still holding the precious suit; he stumbled through the debris and hobbled off in the blackout as quickly as his injured leg would let him.

He passed the night at the feet of an angel in a churchyard, with the suit laid out on a granite tomb nearby. At first light, he gave himself a fitting. For off-the-peg, it was as good as anything from

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the Fifty Shilling Tailors. Better. In the pockets there was four and threepence, a packet of Senior Service, and a box of Swan Vestas. After he had dumped his uniform under a heap of discarded wreaths and flowers, Gorman climbed over the churchyard wall into someone's garden and helped himself to a shirt from the washing-line. Without clothing coupons, what else was he to do?

A smoke, a shave at a barber's in Hounslow High Street, and a cup of tea at the bus station gave him the confidence he needed to enter the town hall and see the National Registration people about an identity card. If you said you had lost your card, it cost a shilling to apply for a replacement, and they would give you a receipt you could show to anyone who challenged you. A passport to civilian life.

Gorman understood identity numbers. When the woman clerk asked him, he rattled off a number similar to his own before he was called up, "AB" to say he lived in the London borough of Bermondsey, and a slight variation in the digits after, to prevent her from tracking him to his real address. He gave a false name. He was getting smart at last.

When the clerk asked him for the shilling, Gorman casually took a two-shilling piece from his pocket and placed it on the counter. She wrote out the receipt, stamped it, handed it to Gorman, and passed him his shilling change. And that was when his luck ran out.

In his elation, he dropped the shilling. It fell off the counter and rolled for a short distance across the floor. Gorman pursued it. He put out his foot to step on it just as someone stooped to pick it up. With his regulation Army boots, Gorman crushed the fingers of the police constable on duty.

No apology could save him. He was unable to explain how a civilian in a smart blue suit came to be wearing metal-studded Army boots. Inside the hour, he was collected by the redcaps.

"I was dead unlucky," he complained once more to Private Plumridge.

"Deplorably unfortunate," agreed Plumridge, who was socially a cut above Gorman. He was regularly in trouble for insubordination when addressing NCOs, who were apt to mistake an elegant turn of phrase for sarcasm. It was a shame he had failed the intelligence test for officer selection, yet to his credit he had come to terms with the rigors of life in the ranks. He had no plans to desert. "To be

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candid with you, Gorman, I'm at a loss to understand why you keep doing it."

Gorman scowled. "I hate the Army, don't I?"

Plumridge leaned on the polisher he was supposed to be using on the floor outside Gorman's cell. "If it comes to that, I'm not passionately devoted to wearing khaki and living in wooden huts myself."

"Why do you stick it, then?" asked Gorman, expecting a short sermon about King and Country and Mr. Churchill.

A smug smile spread across Plumridge's face. "I have an incentive. A certain somebody who happens to believe I'm the finest soldier in the British Army."

"God Almighty, who's that?"

Plumridge lifted one of the flaps of his fatigue-dress and took out a photograph, which he pushed through the grille of the cell door. "Annabelle."

Gorman studied the picture and passed it back. "Not bad. Not bad at all. Your girl?"

"Wife, in point of fact," Plumridge remarked with an attempt to be casual.

"You're married?" Gorman said in a shrill note. "Give us another look at that."

Plumridge obligingly held the picture up. "She is rather fetching, I must admit. She agreed to marry me the day my call-up papers arrived. She adores the uniform, you see. Before that, I was merely one of a string of would-be suitors. Now Annabelle is keeping my home fire burning in Chiddingfold."

"Where's that?"

"In a rather select part of Surrey you wouldn't have heard of. Whenever I get a weekend pass, I'm off there. She's terribly proud of me. Fully expects me to get a stripe before Christmas." He took the photograph away from the grille and gazed at it. "So you see, I'm utterly committed to the Army."

The conversation was cut short by the appearance of Corporal Harker, the military policeman on duty. Harker was the most conscientious redcap in the barracks. "What's that in your grubby fist, soldier?"

"Only a photograph, corporal," answered Plumridge, tucking it away.

Harker snapped his fingers and held out his hand.

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Plumridge reluctantly handed over the picture of Annabelle. "My wife, actually."

"My wife, actually, *corporal.*"

"Sorry, corporal." Plumridge hesitated. "May I have it back, please? It's rather precious."

Harker snorted his displeasure. "You've got no business showing photographs of women to the prisoner. He's under close arrest and you're supposed to be polishing the floor. What else have you been handing over? Cigarettes? Chocolate? Turn out your pockets, at the double."

Plumridge obeyed, producing a letter addressed to Annabelle, his paybook, a set of keys, and his identity disk.

"This should be round your neck, not in your pocket," Harker reprimanded him. "CO's orders: identity disks will be worn by all personnel at all times so long as the air raids continue. That means round your fat neck, Plumridge, have you got that?"

"Yes, corporal."

"Put it on, then. Put this other rubbish back in your pockets and get polishing the floor. I'm going to search the prisoner now, and if I find so much as a peppermint on his person, you're on a charge, do you understand?"

Plumridge nodded unhappily.

The search of Private Gorman was a simple matter because he was wearing only shorts and a singlet, having disposed of his uniform and been deprived of the blue civilian suit. To his credit, he was still wearing his identity disk around his neck. Corporal Harker could find nothing irregular, so he had to content himself with some disparaging remarks about deserters and, when he emerged from the cell, a blistering attack on the quality of Plumridge's polishing. He ordered Plumridge to buff the entire floor again, and with that he went off duty.

"That man's an absolute sadist," Plumridge confided through the grille to Gorman.

"Who's on duty now?"

"The tall ginger one with the moustache."

"That's Corporal Davis. He's all right. He'll let you off in twenty minutes."

This might have been the case, but inside three minutes the air-raid warning sounded and within seconds they could hear the ominous note of a flying bomb. The procedure in an air raid was to evacuate the guardroom, which was a timber structure, and go into

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the underground shelter at the rear. Corporal Davis unlocked Gorman's cell. He was holding a pair of handcuffs.

"Let's have your wrist."

"Sounds like a close one, corp," commented Gorman, untroubled and glad of the distraction.

In accordance with standing orders, Corporal Davis manacled Gorman to himself and shouted to Plumridge to go with them. The entrance to the shelter was about thirty yards away, across a stretch of grass. Before they were through the back door of the guardroom, Gorman heard the engine of the V1 cut out. He looked up.

It was diving straight toward them out of a brilliant blue sky, its black-and-green camouflage clearly visible on the upper fuselage, its stubby, squared-off wings and tail giving it the look of an aircraft crudely manufactured for destruction, its propulsion unit spurting orange flames.

Corporal Davis yelled, "Come on!" to Plumridge, who was last out of the door. Gorman, his injured leg forgotten, was already halfway across the grass toward the shelter, jerking Davis with him.

The flying bomb didn't actually hit the guardroom. It crashed into the tarmac just in front of the main gates. The blast ripped the guard room and the armory apart. Slats of wood hailed down.

Gorman was temporarily deafened, but unhurt. He had made it to the sandbags heaped outside the shelter and leapt over into the dug-out front as the explosion happened. His arm was still draped over the sandbags, attached to Corporal Davis. He tugged on it and felt no response. He hauled himself up and over the sandbags.

Corporal Davis had been hit by some piece of flying debris. He was either stunned or dead. Gorman didn't wait to check. Someone else's misfortune was his opportunity. He felt for the chain attached to Davis's belt, found the key of the handcuffs, and released himself. He was about to desert for the eighth time.

He looked around him. Black smoke was blotting out the sky. The wreckage of the guardroom had caught fire and the long grass at the rear was smoldering. It would probably be safe to go out by the main gate. The blokes on sentry duty must have been blasted to Kingdom Come.

As he stepped forward, he almost tripped over a body in fatigue-dress. Private Plumridge was dead, dead beyond argument, with half his head blown off. Gorman's first impulse was to hare away, and he had already gone a couple of paces when the thought occurred

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to him that Plumridge's fatigue-dress might be of use. He knew from experience that nights in the open could be cold, even in August, and he didn't relish sleeping rough dressed as he was.

He braced himself for another look at the body. The jacket was soiled with blood and ripped in a couple of places, but worth taking if there was time, and the trousers were perfectly usable. When it came to deserting, Gorman wasn't squeamish about robbing the living or the dead. So he unbuttoned the clothes and peeled them off, leaving Plumridge in singlet and shorts, just as he was himself.

Then he had his brainwave.

It was sparked by the sight of Plumridge's identity disk. The opportunity was there to free himself totally from the Army. If he removed Plumridge's disk and replaced it with his own, everyone would assume that 505918 Gorman, Private E., was dead. They wouldn't be able to identify the body by looking at the face, because most of it was missing. And in a few minutes the grass where Plumridge was lying would be alight, charring him all over.

While he was switching the disks, Gorman thought of an extra refinement. He ran back to Corporal Davis's body, dragged it the few yards across the turf, and positioned it alongside Plumridge. Then he clipped the spare handcuff over Plumridge's wrist. The clincher, he told himself, grinning. That done, he grabbed the fatigue-dress and dashed across the smoldering grass to freedom.

Soon after, the Army tackled the job of putting out the fires and recovering the bodies. There were four dead and they were identified as Privates Harris and Parks, the two men on guard at the main gate, Corporal Davis of the military police, and the prisoner, Private Gorman. Next of kin were informed.

After some hours, there was concern about the welfare of Private Plumridge, who was known to have been detailed to perform fatigues in the guardroom and who appeared to be missing. A thorough examination of the debris failed to reveal a fifth body. Searches of the surrounding area were organized and a trail of footsteps was discovered leading from the charred area where two of the bodies had been found toward the main gate. It was assumed that Plumridge had wandered, possibly in a state of concussion, and the civilian police were informed. Two days later, his identity disk was found by a man walking his dog on Hounslow Heath.

Plumridge's wife Annabelle was contacted, but she informed Corporal Harker, the military policeman who called on her in Chiddingfold, that she had heard nothing from him. She seemed

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mystified, but not unduly distressed by her husband's disappearance.

A week passed, and there was no further news of Plumridge. The funerals of the four men killed by the flying bomb were all attended by senior officers. Ten days after the tragedy, a service of remembrance was conducted by the padre.

After the service, the CO called at the temporary, prefabricated guardroom and spoke to Corporal Harker. He expressed concern about the lack of information concerning Private Plumridge. He detested the very idea, but he felt obliged to consider the possibility that Plumridge had taken advantage of the bombing to go absent without leave. After questioning Harker closely about the reaction of Annabelle Plumridge to her husband's disappearance, he authorized Harker to make a second visit to Chiddingford and see whether the lady could throw any more light on the mystery.

The same ten days had been a testing time for Private Gorman. To his credit, it was the longest period he had spent on the run. Yet without civilian clothes or even a passable uniform, he had been compelled to spend the days in hiding and the nights scavenging. He was living mainly on raw eggs and vegetables stolen from suburban gardens. It was much too soon after his supposed demise to think of going home. At the sight of him, his mother would scream and his father would tell the whole of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe that a miracle had happened.

He sat hunched in his latest hideout, a dilapidated boat-shed at Twickenham, ironically trying to lift his spirits with what the Army called planning. What he needed urgently was a set of clothes and some money. It was no use trusting to luck. He couldn't expect to come across another bombsite with a suit on a hanger waiting for him to collect. As for money, Plumridge hadn't left so much as a halfpenny in the pockets of the fatigue-dress. Just the paybook, and what use was that to a deserter? Gorman had torn it into small pieces and thrown it out days ago, with the letter to Annabelle. Apart from the clothes, the only things of Plumridge's still in his possession were two keys on a ring, one that probably fitted the padlock of his locker, the other a Yale which had come in useful for scraping the dirt off carrots and parsnips. He had since picked up a knife, so the keys could be chucked out as well now. There was small chance of finding a lock they would open.

Or was there?

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As he dangled the key-ring on his finger, Gorman had another of his brainwaves. Wasn't it reasonable to suppose that the Yale was the key to Plumridge's house in Surrey, and wouldn't it be worth finding the place and seeing if it fitted? There were sure to be clothes there, and food, and probably money. This was the luck he needed, and all this time he had been carrying it around with him!

Where was it Plumridge had said he lived? The address had been on the blasted letter. Victoria House—it had struck Gorman as comical, Plums at Victoria House—but what the hell was the name of the village? Chittyfield? Chiddingfield? Not quite.

Chiddingfold! Victoria House, Chiddingfold!

It wasn't easy to find the place. Surrey was a large county, and signposts had been removed to frustrate troop movements in the event of an invasion. He headed south, away from London, reasoning that it must be out of the suburban reaches. Going through Hampton Court on the first night, he broke into three cars parked outside a pub before he found what he needed: a county map.

Chiddingfold was near Haslemere on the Sussex border, too far to reach in a night, so he walked the twenty miles to Guildford and laid up in some outbuildings at a farm just south of the town. He found apples stored there in boxes and ate enough to satisfy hunger and thirst in one.

The following night was a Saturday and a full moon, so he was glad he hadn't left too many miles to cover, because people would be out later than usual. It was after eleven when he started, and half past two in the morning when he finally located Victoria House. Happily, it was a detached building in its own grounds. No telephone wires were visible. He had no wish to disturb Annabelle Plumridge's sleep if he could avoid it, but it was a relief to know that she couldn't call the police.

The first thing was to see whether the key fitted. He started up the drive toward the house.

In bed, Annabelle heard the crunch of gravel outside. "Listen!"

"What's the matter?"

"Just listen, Simon. There's someone outside!"

"A fox, I expect."

"No, it's too heavy for that. He's by the front door! Oh, God, what if it's my husband!"

Corporal Harker swung his legs to the floor and pulled on a pair

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of shorts. He went to the chair over which he had draped his uniform and drew his baton from its sheath. Then he glided out of the door and downstairs.

Annabelle shrank back in bed, pulling the sheet tight around her neck. She heard the sound of a key turning in the door, a shout of surprise, and then a crack that made her gasp with terror, followed by two more, then silence.

The suspense was petrifying before the landing light came on, and Corporal Harker stood in the doorway holding his baton. "I'm afraid I had to hit him," he said, breathing heavily.

"Charlie? My husband?" whispered Annabelle.

He hesitated. "Private Plumridge, yes. You don't have to come downstairs. I can deal with it."

"Is he—?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Oh, my poor Charlie!" Annabelle started to sob.

"Come off it," Corporal Harker said in the sharp voice of authority he used in the guardroom. "You told me you couldn't bear to live with a deserter. You said you fancied me in my red cap and white gaiters."

"I know, but—"

"He must have had a thin skull. Some people do. It's better this way. Your reputation, my career."

"But what shall we do with him?"

"Easy. You don't have to do a thing. Better if you stay up here. I'll put him in the van and take him with me. I know a couple of bombsites on the way back to barracks. I'll hide him under some rubble, and even if they find him no one will ever guess who he was, or how it happened."

"I suppose it was just bad luck," Annabelle said to appease her feelings of shock.

"That's right," Corporal Harker confirmed. "He was unlucky. Dead unlucky."

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THE JURY BOX
by Allen J. Hubin

The merging of fact and fiction in our field goes back at least to police reminiscences in the 1800s, such as those of James M'Govan and Chief Inspector Littlechild. Later came the scrupulously dramatized reconstructions of actual crimes by John Dickson Carr *(The Murder of Sir Edmund Godfrey)* and Lillian de la Torre *(The Heir of Douglas)* and others, as well as the more recent work of such authors as Truman Capote *(In Cold Blood)* and Joseph Wambaugh *(The Onion Field)*.

The latest of this type is Thomas Larry Adcock's *Precinct 19* (Doubleday, $15.95), a vivid interweaving of a host of evocative vignettes based on actual incidents in New York's Upper East Side. The author spent a year with the precinct's cops, who emerge as a fascinating bunch. Like Ed Smith, more at home as an invisible, filthy undercover bum than in any other role. Like Cibella Borges, under suspension for posing for a couple of raunchy magazines shortly before she became a policewoman. Like Tony Ciffo, a tough cop's cop. Or Keenan, whose desk job rankles, whose pregnant wife rankles, whose mistress rankles. We also meet the civilian inhabitants of the precinct: scumbags, prostitutes, innocents, financiers, thieves, murderers; apprentice hoods, mainliners, tourists. Excellent!

John Sherwood's *Death at the BBC* was a notable achievement; his latest, *Green Trigger Fingers* (Scribners, $11.95), is equally impressive. When widowed, Celia Grant moved to the village of Westfield and established a small nursery. It flourished, keeping her and two helpers busy and eliciting a buy-out offer from a local businessman who is burdened by no discernible ethics. Now a local couple has been hacked to death, Celia takes a position which no matter how sensible alienates the town's influential snooty element, and her business disintegrates. But she starts seeing pieces and putting them together . . . Sherwood knows well how to capture tantalizing settings and memorable characters.

Toward the end of S. T. Haymon's *Stately Homicide* (St. Martin's, $11.95), Inspector Ben Jurnet observes bleakly: "All love hurts." That's what this fascinating tale is about: love proper or not (mostly not), love licit or not (mostly not), love producing pain, suicide, murder, alienation, pretense, and deception. Even Jurnet himself is not immune: he's converting to Judaism for his beloved Miriam, who is (unfaithfully?) on holiday in Greece. Affairs at Bullen Hall come to the inspector's attention when its new curator is found dead in a moat full of hungry eels. Ben must explore the history of the Appleyard family, notably including Lazlo Appleyard, hero of the Hungarian

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uprising of 1956, and the fruits of that dead womanizer's intrigues. Haymon treats her theme with a master's touch.

Gerald Hammond's series about gunsmith Keith Calder is rewarding indeed, as now amply demonstrated by *Cousin Once Removed* (St. Martin's, $10.95). Here Calder and wife are touring France, following a trail of old guns and amassing a nice haul. And drawing some attention: their car is twice broken into. Back home in Scotland, his purchases in France again draw unnatural interest. Why? What could be worth killing about? Calder, a resourceful and observant chap, sorts it out in most satisfying fashion.

The annual cause for rejoicing edited by Edward D. Hoch is at hand: *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1984* (Walker, $14.95). The standard is high as usual, the fare nicely varied. Among the tales, Lawrence Block one-ups his series thief, Bernie Rhodenbarr, in New York City; Dorothy Salisbury Davis offers a fatally determined woman in rural New York; Brian Garfield shows what might happen when land developers get greedy near Los Angeles; Joseph Hansen studies guilt and revenge in middle America; Hoch himself provides a chilling picture of romance and death among young people in the eastern U.S.; and Bill Pronzini's nameless private eye confronts murder in a locked San Francisco zoo.

Probably the most unlikely publisher to issue a mystery novel is the Sierra Club. Yet now we have *The Turquoise Dragon* ($12.95) by David Rains Wallace, author of previous nonfiction on themes ecological. Here George Kilgore serves as hero of sorts (he's retired from both the California forest service and marijuana farming) when an old friend is shot. The murder has something to do with biology, endangered (and even heretofore unidentified) animal species, the importation of drugs and refugees, and the damming of virgin canyons. This is an attractively fresh tale, even if the chief villain slides down the gullet with some difficulty.

In *True Crime* (St. Martin's, $15.95), Max Allan Collins very capably continues his Nate Heller series, providing a tight, provocative, and compelling blend of fact and fancy. It's 1934, with depression, prohibition, gangsters, and the World's Fair in Chicago. John Dillinger is wanted so badly that J. Edgar Hoover is salivating and his agents are shooting Dillinger lookalikes on sight. Nate, ex-cop now a private eye, is hired by a traveling salesman to watch his wife, suspected of extracurricular activities. Nate follows her; she's guilty and her partner sure looks a lot like Dillinger might after plastic surgery. The fun is only beginning . . . My only regret is the author's overclose attention to his hero's copulations.

I trust the high incidence of fictional psychopaths randomly stalking the citizenry of New York is not matched in real life. In any event, we've another in *The Eye* (The Mysterious Press, $15.95) by

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Bill Pronzini and John Lutz. Here a demented academician imagines he's God and, peering through his telescope (his "eye"), he identifies those who should die for their sins on a patch of north Manhattan. Loftily, he proceeds with his appointed tasks; how will he betray himself? An adroit and suspenseful working out of a venerable theme.

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"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

PRESENT IMPERFECT

by HILDA WIGDER

There's no doubt about it; the issue is clear:
I really will have to kill you, my dear.
It's becoming more difficult, day after day,
To put up with your gripes and the things that you say.

If you didn't have money, I'd leave you and go,
But life without dough's not a very good show.
So it's really quite simple, I'm sure you'll agree,
That your death will just be your last present to me.

And these were the thoughts that passed through his mind,
As his wife passed the drink laced with cyanide.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Although Lorraine Collins published a book of humor, What's a Place Like This Doing to a Nice Girl Like Me? *(Abbey Press, 1973), wrote a feature called "Marriage Go Round" for* Marriage and Family Living Magazine *for four years, and has published magazine articles, profiles, and features in the U.S., Singapore, and England, "Predators" is her first professionally published fiction. She lived in Singapore with her husband and three children for three years and moved to London in 1981, but is returning to the U.S. this summer. She was born in South Dakota, has a degree from Cornell College, Iowa, and did some graduate work at Denver University. In Sherry, Luke, and Marie she has created as complex a triangle as you're likely to encounter for some time. . .*

PREDATORS

by LORRAINE COLLINS

Bitter winds blow in the high country this time of year. It's hard to remember when it was June, when the high meadows were carpeted with lupin and daisies and Indian paintbrush, and the sage smelled so sweet. Young deer stood here then, in the dappled shade of Aspen, and we watched them moving down to drink in this creek, but they saw us and went leaping off through the brush. Sherry laughed with delight and said she had never seen deer so close before—she hadn't grown up out here where the country is still so open.

Clear water sparkled in this narrow stream that day, and it was so cool and welcome this far up in the mountains we weren't afraid to drink it. The sun warmed our backs as we sat on these flat rocks and we talked about building a dam across the stream, making a pool deep enough to sit in, deep enough for skinnydipping. But

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Sherry laughed, teasing me, and said, "I bet you wouldn't do it, Marie, not even clear up here, not even with only me." Her blue-violet eyes sparkled like the water. I suppose she was right. I didn't even take my blouse off even though it was so warm, but she pulled her T-shirt off over her head, wriggling and stretching her lithe, firm young body and saying, "Ah, that's better," and then lying back on the rocks, sunning herself, topless, with nobody but God and me to see how golden she was already, so early in the summer.

That day, with the summer and life so full, Sherry told me Luke wanted her to come live with him, and she was going to do it. "It's time I was out of your way, anyhow," she said. "I've taken advantage of your hospitality long enough, Marie. I was only going to stay a few weeks, remember?" She lay there with her eyes closed, waiting to hear what I'd say. She was too beautiful, too spoiled because of it, not to know she could have whatever she wanted. She knew she could stay with me forever if she wanted to. Did she want to hear me say it?

I said, "It's all right—I haven't minded a bit, you know that." There was a sudden tightness in my throat. What could I say? "It's been very nice, Sherry. I've enjoyed having someone in the house."

I wanted to say how I liked just watching her in the evenings when I came home from work, when I was so weary of being discreet and inscrutable and polite and efficient, as I'd learned to be in twenty-five years of working in a bank—and more years than that living secretly and alone. I wanted to say how much I enjoyed cooking for two, how beautiful I thought everything about her was, how lonely I had been before, but of course she knew.

"Luke wants me so bad," she said. "And he's so different, you know, so—masculine and masterful. It's exciting being with him, and sometimes I think I do love him. I was terrifically attracted to him the first time he came into the bar. He didn't treat me like just a barmaid, you know? And when he found out I was working my way out west, he said he hoped I'd settle for this far. Wasn't that sweet?"

She opened her eyes and sat up suddenly, glowing with excitement. "Marie, he's buying me a car! What do you think of that?" She lay back down again, closing her eyes against the sun. "And it's time I did something." Her eyelids fluttered just a bit so she could peek under those velvety lashes, but we could both pretend she had her eyes closed, if we wanted to, and she reached her hand out blindly, fumbling, and grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "You'll

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still be there if I need you, though, won't you, Marie? In case it's an awful mistake?"

The water in the stream is much darker now, with a film of ice along the edges, so it's like a mirror—and when I lean forward a little I can see my red hat looking just as silly as I thought it would on my mop of salt-and-pepper hair, and the startled look in my eyes behind my gold-rimmed glasses. I don't look like a hunter—more like the prey, if we were after a demented rabbit. It's because of my eyes, I think, they're so pale—hardly blue at all—and the almost invisible eyebrows that make my face seem so blank and bald. I can see my arm stretching out, but I can't see what I'm holding—which is the 270 Winchester rifle with its telescopic sight that Sherry insisted I carry.

When they first talked to me about going hunting with them, Luke thrust this rifle in front of me and said, "Go ahead, Marie, touch it, it won't hurt you!" His laugh was like an explosion. He stood there, big as a bear in that gaudy, tasteless living room, with the green-velvet drapes and brass ashtrays and the leather sofa with the picture of the longhorn cow stitched on the back. I hoped that was the taste of Luke's former wife and not of the man himself. His wife left town a year and a half ago.

He stood holding the gun out toward me, his eyes the color of the gun barrel, his muscular arms as strong as the steel it was made of. I didn't like him—the way he bared his teeth when he laughed or his shaggy mane of yellow hair or the way he seemed to be swaggering even when he was standing still. Sherry had told me things about him, had come in crying one night, and I had said, "Why don't you leave him, then?" She said she couldn't, that he'd come after her if she tried—he was crazy about her and he'd do something violent to her or to himself if she tried to leave him. She had no money, noplace to go.

"You can come back here," I had said, trying not to betray the joyful hope that made my heart lurch. She shook her head. "He'd come get me. He'd do something terrible!" So I said I'd give her the money to leave, to go on to California, or back to Missouri, but she said no, Luke would know what I'd done and he'd get even with me.

In that case, I almost told her, let's leave together, the two of us, but I was afraid of what she'd say.

Luke stood there with the rifle that day, grinning, sure that I was

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afraid of it, but I just didn't want to waste time talking about hunting. When November comes, half the men in the country go deer hunting, and sometimes their women go along, too—at least to drive the deer toward the guns and carry the extra license so they can get another deer. They say it's for the meat, for venison roasts and salami, but it's for the hunting.

I don't like to go hunting, so of course, like everybody else, Luke thinks I don't know anything about guns. I finally had to take hold of the rifle and go through the motions of looking through the telescopic sight, aiming at the bedroom door because it was the only thing that was far enough away to focus the four-power scope on. Sherry came out of the door just then, and she gave a little scream—I could see the round O of her red mouth in the scope. She sagged against the wall with her hand at her throat, wide-eyed and still, and then she said, "Oh, it's you, Marie! You scared me!" Luke gave one of his rude, rasping laughs and said, "Me and Marie are just fooling around, Sherry—so far, anyway."

Sherry moved quietly, very subdued. I had never seen her like that before and I wondered what had happened before I got there, what threats they had flung at each other. She sat still and watchful while I let Luke show me how to load the rifle and put it on safety and then empty it, giving me a secret look, because she remembered those evenings when I'd talked and talked of what my life had been and how I learned to shoot a gun before I was twelve years old.

I finally said I would go along with them that day to chase the deer up the gulch toward them if they really wanted me to, and I'd get a license, but I didn't need to carry a gun. Sherry said, "You better take it, Marie. You might need it and Luke has enough guns for an army."

I said, "Need it? To defend myself against what? Chipmunks? Trees?" But Sherry had such a strange look on her face I didn't try to joke any more.

She sat beside him, looking tiny and vulnerable next to him, and he put his arm around her, hugging her so tight she gasped. He grinned at me with that wolfish grin. "Please, Marie?" Sherry said, looking fragile, frightened. So I have his rifle today.

I can see something snagged underwater on one of the little roots that stick out from the side of the creek, a clump of greenish moss, captured but floating underwater. It looks like the decomposing

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remains of something that died quite a while ago, perhaps in August, perhaps as long ago as June. I wouldn't drink from the stream today.

I have never been a hunter, but my father made the boys, and me too, all learn to shoot and kept a loaded gun by the back door because of the coyotes that came down from the hills at night to get the chickens or the sheep. He used to say, "Predators are the meanest things on earth, and they'll get you if you don't get them, remember that!" He made us all learn how to shoot the 30.06 and the .410 shotgun, and the 20-gauge. The boys learned how to shoot the 12-gauge, too, but I wasn't big enough.

My father had an arsenal, my mother used to say. He kept the guns locked in the pine cabinet he made himself, except for that shotgun by the back door. He and the boys hunted everything, ducks and pheasants and antelope and deer and jack rabbits, but they didn't expect me to go along, and I didn't. The only time I went with them was the year we went after the fox that was causing so much trouble. At least they said it was a fox, although after we killed him and the chickens still got killed and the sheep were still found bleeding by the fence they decided it must have been a neighbor's dog that was doing it. They finally managed to prove it when there was a skiff of snow one morning and tracks led back across the fields to Jensen's place, and Jensen didn't have any choice but to shoot his dog.

That fall, when the wind was almost as bitter as it is now, I had to go out at twilight and sit on a ridge looking out across the prairie with the sinking sun behind me, and the wind in my face, watching the sky turn from grey to lavender and listening to the fox call that my father used. He crouched, blowing into it to make the reed vibrate until it made a squealing scream, like a wounded rabbit, so the fox would come for it. We all had to sit downwind and keep our rifles off of safety so there wouldn't be the slightest click before the click of the trigger, because the fox was too smart to fool around with, my father said, and we had to listen to that screaming.

We were all scattered up and down that ridge, my two brothers and my father and me, and I was the one who shot the fox. I shot it before I even knew I'd done it. I saw it come up out of the river bottom, crouching, suspicious, and turn its head to look toward me, but I already had it in the sight, and squeezed the trigger just like I'd been taught. There was nothing to it. It was so easy to kill it, and my father was so proud of me and said I could have the money we'd get for the pelt—but I didn't want it, and I never went out with

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them again. I didn't really think the fox was doing me any harm, and as it turned out I was right, wasn't I?

It's cold sitting here now, remembering, thinking. I've been here a long time. I know what Sherry wants. Last night when she came to my house so late, crying, clinging to me so I could feel her trembling and my nightgown was wet with her tears, I knew.

"Oh, Marie," she said, "oh, Marie, hold me! I'm so scared! I'm so cold!"

I said, "Shush, shush," and pulled her over to the sofa, wrapped us both in the blanket, and cuddled her to keep her warm, and petted her and comforted her—and she said she loved me and she was so afraid. Oh, I burned so fiercely!

"I could come back to you," she said. "I could come here and be safe. Luke is so crazy, and he thinks I've been seeing somebody else. But I haven't been, Marie! He's so jealous, he's going to hurt me, I know he is!" She cried and clung to me and put her head on my breast. "I could come and stay with you, if only it was safe," she said. "Or we could take my car and go somewhere. To California!"

Sitting here by this cold, dark stream, watching the moss that is snagged and drowning, I can still feel her trembling, can still see the panic in her eyes. Why does she want me to do this? Why this? Twenty-five years of working in a bank taught me how to sit discreet and inscrutable, and watch, and learn. I know what to look for, I know what I see when I see it. I looked quite a while ago, that first tearful visit of hers, so I have known. I just didn't realize Sherry could go through so much money so fast. Where has she put it?

I wish she hadn't come to me last night. She really is frightened. He has found out, I think, about the money—all those checks he didn't write himself. Like the credit-card bills I didn't know I had when Sherry lived with me. And he must be almost sure about Joel Greenwood, too. That's what it is. He might forget the money, but not Joel Greenwood, if he finds out for sure.

But she shouldn't have come to me. She shouldn't have held me like that, and shouldn't have spoken of love. "He has become so mean and terrible, Marie," she said.

Sitting here so quietly with the wind in my face, and the safety off, I have been waiting and waiting, but now there is the first crackle and crunch of their movement, the first shadows through the trees. "This time," Sherry said, "let's have Marie sit and wait, and we'll drive the deer up—okay, Luke—just once?" She's sure I'll

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do it, without even thinking about it, or planning it, or being asked, just do it, when I have the chance, because it's so easy to do and I've done other things for her and I don't like him at all.

Predators always go for the weak and the wounded, I know that—for the ones who are screaming with pain. Luke is too strong for her, but she shouldn't have come to me last night like that. She shouldn't have looked at me that way, tempted me like that, lied like that. If you don't get the predators, they get you, that's what my father said. I can see them coming through the trees now, the red hats bobbing along, and I lift up the rifle and sight through the scope, and this time I'm not going to shoot the innocent one.

DETECTIVERSE

REVERSED CHARGES

by AVONNE McLAUGHLIN

There once was a mystery writer
Whose characters teamed up to fight her.
John's the victim, she said,
And the killer is Fred,
But they exchanged places to spite her.

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a Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

This is Edward D. Hoch's second story about gypsy leader Michael Vlado. The first appeared in Bill Pronzini's anthology, The Ethnic Detectives. *Like most Eastern European gypsies, Vlado and his people had settled in one place and were attempting to integrate their culture with that of the general population. But although they were not nomads, in this story they travel to Moscow so that Michael's horse, Rom Way, can run at the Hippodrome. . .*

ODDS ON A GYPSY

by EDWARD D. HOCH

In the spring of that year, Captain Segar often made the long drive through the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps to the village of Gravita. He had grown friendly with the gypsy leader Michael Vlado, who was attempting to educate his people and instruct them in the ways of farming.

In the few short months they'd know one another, Segar had learned a great deal about gypsy life in general and Michael in particular. Though gypsy caravans still roamed the back roads of Romania, Michael Vlado and his people were not nomads. Like most Eastern European gypsies, they had settled in one place and were attempting to integrate their culture with that of the general population.

Still, the old gypsy ways died hard, and one of Segar's special treats on a spring afternoon was watching Michael and the others as they trained the horses. The races run in the old pasture near Michael's house were as exciting as those he'd seen in Bucharest, and even in Moscow. It was after an especially exciting race, won by Michael's horse Rom Way, that Segar first mentioned his brother.

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"That horse should be racing for high stakes, Michael. He's every bit as good as some of those old plow horses that run at the Moscow Hippodrome."

Michael merely smiled, as he often did at Captain Segar's pronouncements. "What do you know of racing in Moscow, Captain?"

Segar, who'd spent half his forty years as a member of the government police, did not like to be thought of as a provincial man. "I have visited my brother there," he answered stiffly. "Konrad is in the Agriculture Ministry in Moscow, and they run the Hippodrome. I've spent many days there on my vacations."

"I apologize. You may speak with authority."

"I say this much with authority, Michael. Rom Way could beat most of the horses in Moscow. Who is that young man who rides him?"

Michael called to Tanti Slatina, the young gypsy farmhand who served as his jockey. Tanti was short and lightweight, perfect for riding in races, and he had an irrepressible enthusiasm that made him willing to try anything. "Did I ride well?" he asked Michael, leading the big chestnut horse over to Vlado and Segar.

"Very well, Tanti. You know Captain Segar, don't you?"

"Of course." They shook hands and Segar studied the young man, barely out of his teens.

"You like to ride, don't you?"

"Of course! I would rather do it than anything!"

"He rode Rom Way at the district fair last summer when the horse was only two," Michael said. "This year he'll do much better."

But Captain Segar shook his head. "Rom Way and this young man are both wasted at district fairs. My brother from Moscow is visiting me next week, Michael. Let me bring him up here to see them run."

"For what reason?"

"Perhaps he can advise you about the horse. This could be a money-maker for us all."

The gypsy smiled. "What sort of talk is that, coming from a socialist captain of police?"

Segar waved away the words with his hand. He always resisted any talk of politics. Like many Romanian officials, his attitude toward Moscow was ambivalent. The country had not endorsed the 1980 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and had taken part in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics boycotted by Russia, but the two nations remained friendly. "Will you talk to my brother or not?"

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"Very well," Michael agreed. "Bring him along. We'll give him some good gypsy food."

Michael Vlado was not the King of the Gypsies in Gravita, but the old man who held that title had long ago passed on all real authority to Michael. It was he who presided over the informal village court to settle disputes according to gypsy law, and he who took on the role of father and protector to his people in times of trouble. On the day Captain Segar arrived at Michael's small farmhouse with his brother Konrad, the gypsy was mediating a land dispute between two families. Michael's wife Rosanna, a quiet woman skilled in the carving of wooden animals, spoke pleasantly with them until her husband's return, showing off some of her latest work.

"This horse is lovely," Konrad said, passing the carving to his brother. "Don't you think so, Nicol?"

"It is indeed," replied Segar, who rarely used his given name. Having Konrad back for a visit reminded him of more than his name. It reminded him of the family dispute twenty years earlier when Romania had disagreed with some Russian economic policies and Konrad, five years older than Nicol, had left home to work for the Soviets in Moscow. His rise in the Agriculture Ministry had been slow but steady, though he was the first to admit he'd never pictured himself as one of those operating the Moscow racetrack.

With Michael's belated arrival, the tempo of the conversation picked up. He took them out to the stable to see Rom Way at once and within an hour Tanti Slatina had saddled the chestnut for a romp around the oval track. "A bit makeshift," Michael admitted to his visitor from Moscow, "but we make do with it."

Konrad Segar did nothing to conceal his interest. He was a big man, who clearly had led a better life than his brother. He asked about betting and about how Rom Way performed against other horses. When Michael staged an actual race, using the horse of a neighbor as competition, Konrad seemed genuinely impressed by the time of the big chestnut. "He is a gypsy horse."

"That he is," Michael agreed.

"He should race at the Hippodrome," Segar's brother decided. "You bring him there."

The gypsy laughed. "Moscow is nine hundred miles away."

"Since when was a gypsy afraid to travel? You could drive that in one day."

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"Not pulling a horse trailer."

"Two days, then. I will furnish all the necessary papers to get you across the border."

"Rom Way has never run at an official track. He has never run in Russia at all."

"Our racing statistics are very poor," Konrad Segar admitted. "The program lists the past five finishes and times, but not when or where the horse raced. Often even these meager statistics are omitted."

Young Tanti Slatina had caught the man's enthusiasm. "Can we go?" he asked Michael. "Can I race in Moscow?"

The gypsy leader turned to Captain Segar. "What do you think?"

"If you race in Moscow, I will come to see it myself."

Michael promised to think about it over dinner. Later Segar saw him consulting briefly with his wife, and then he told Segar he was going out to speak with the parents of his young jockey. When he came back, he was smiling. "All right," he decided. "We are going to Moscow."

Racing at the Hippodrome was only three times a week—on Sunday afternoon and Wednesday and Friday evenings—and involved a complex mixture of trotting and conventional races run on an outer and inner track. Captain Segar felt he knew the operations of the track by heart from the time he'd spent there and from having heard his brother talk so much about it. He'd taken leave during the period in June when Michael and Tanti and Rom Way would be making the trip, planning to drive along with them, saying there was plenty of room in the car they were taking.

Rosanna Vlado came out to see them off, having packed lunches for them to eat en route. She did not seem overjoyed at her husband's absence from home but apparently had made no effort to stop him. He had made his decision, and in a gypsy household there was nothing more to be said. A horse trailer was hooked up to the back of the car and Rom Way was coaxed inside. The big chestnut seemed tense with anticipation, as if aware that big things were expected of him.

"Are there gypsies in Russia?" Tanti asked as they reached the main highway and turned north toward the border.

"A great many of them," Michael Vlado assured him, "though not as many as there were years ago. The Rom have always been well treated in Russia, even under the Czars."

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"What must I do to be a jockey in Russia?"

"The rules for racing at the Hippodrome are quite loose," Segar assured him. "Generally horses come from the state-training facilities in the country or are trained in Moscow. Jockeys and horse trainers each receive a fixed salary of four thousand rubles a year, plus about thirty percent of the horse's winnings. Winnings are not large—a few hundred dollars at best—nor are the bets. The average jockey might race from May to August and then work in a factory the rest of the year."

"But Rom Way is not from a horse-training farm," Tanti said, perhaps fearful he would not be allowed to race at the Hippodrome after all, "and I am not even a Russian citizen."

"My brother has taken care of all that," Segar assured them.

Behind the wheel of the car, Michael Vlado smiled. "Perhaps he expects to make a big killing on Rom Way."

"It could hardly be that. The maximum bet at any one window is ten rubles. A winning horse might return less than one ruble. Of course, bettors hurry from window to window to get down as many wagers as possible, but with as many as seventeen races on the card there is very little time between them. Often the horses are already loosening up on one track before the previous race has finished on the other track. There is no time to collect one's winnings before the next race goes off, so bettors often operate in teams, with one betting while the other collects."

They crossed the border into Russia and continued north, bearing to the east. At first the countryside appeared much the same as it had in Romania, but as they traveled farther north they entered a more industrialized region and came upon a modern divided highway.

After a night's sleep along the road in the car, Michael tended to the horse and they ate a meager breakfast. Then they were on the road again, taking the divided highway that would lead them directly into Moscow. As they approached urban areas, Tanti was surprised to see women with brooms along the highway, sweeping the grass free of litter and leaves.

Once in the city itself, they drove directly to Konrad's apartment in a highrise building of recent construction. As a government official his quarters were better than most, and more spacious than the apartment Segar had seen on his last visit. As they entered, a

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man was leaving—a small man who pushed past them without apology and hurried to the elevator.

"Don't mind him," Konrad said lightly, greeting them with handshakes all around. "His name is Vladimir Kosok. He's one of the trainers from the Hippodrome. With them there is always trouble of one kind or another. Come—sit down. What do you think of Moscow so far?"

"The streets are so wide," Tanti Slatina answered. "And so many buildings! I'm not used to the crowds."

"You had better get used to them if you are to ride at the Hippodrome. There you will see crowds, believe me."

He took them to dinner that evening at a nearby restaurant, and then showed them the one-room apartment he had arranged for them in the same building as his own. Michael and young Tanti were to share it, while Segar stayed with his brother. Konrad had arranged for everything, including someone to stable Rom Way until he could be properly entered at the Hippodrome in the morning. Segar was pleased, and he could see that his gypsy friends were enjoying their first sights of Moscow.

The Hippodrome was a massive monument to a Russia long past—a century and a half old and still showing a sort of squalid grandeur. It was located on Begovaya Street, northwest of the central city and not far from the Moscow zoo. At its entrance, a dozen high Corinthian columns supported statues of rearing horses, but inside the grandstand's marble steps were badly worn and its walls and floors soiled. The infield within the double track was overgrown with early summer weeds. Still, Segar thought, one could marvel at the columns supporting the lavishly decorated grandstand roof that dated back to Czarist times and imagine for an afternoon that one had entered another age.

By Sunday noon, the place was already filled with some 5,000 spectators in preparation for the 1:00 P.M. start of the first race. They seemed to be working people of all ages—old veterans wearing medals and brash young men in tight western-styled jeans. Although no drinks were sold, some of the younger ones drank vodka from flasks. It was a good-natured crowd.

Rom Way had been given stable space in the huge area that housed more than five hundred horses. He would work out on Monday and Tuesday in preparation for his first race on Wednesday evening. To

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Segar it all seemed too casual, but he assumed Konrad knew what he was doing.

"Is this a summer track only?" Michael asked as they waited for the first race down near the rail. "In Romania we hear of the harsh Moscow winters."

"No, we have learned to make money in the best capitalist tradition. It goes, after all, to subsidize the Moscow theater and the Bolshoi ballet. In February we hold troika races here, with horses pulling sleighs. And the harness-racing continues year round."

A fountain in the infield began to gush water and the public-address system came alive with martial music. Then a clanging bell signaled the start of the first race.

Though Segar was hardly a betting man, the small amount of the wagers frustrated him. Michael and Tanti managed to bet a couple of winners, but it was pure luck. The racing programs were incomprehensible and the computerized tote board—made in Finland, according to Konrad—indicated which horse had drawn the most bets but did not report the actual odds.

Konrad appeared with black-caviar sandwiches for everyone—a delicacy sold for less than a ruble each at the track. "We took in twenty million rubles in bets last year," he said proudly, "and we may top that this year."

The long card of races dragged on until 7:30 that evening but long before that they had abandoned the grandstand and were inspecting the stable area with Konrad. Along the way, their party acquired another member—a slender blonde woman named Alexis, who seemed to be on intimate terms with Konrad. Segar had known of his brother's divorce for some time, but he was surprised that this attractive young woman should find Konrad desirable.

"Have you seen the sights of Moscow yet?" she asked as they strolled in the stable area, carefully avoiding the constant parade of horses to and from the track. "Lenin's tomb, the Kremlin, the Bolshoi?"

"We arrived only late yesterday," Michael told her.

She was obviously taken with his handsome dark features. "Konrad tells me you are a gypsy, Michael. Do you travel in a caravan?"

"No, I live on a little farm in Romania with my wife and children."

"His wife tells fortunes," Captain Segar told them. "She has predicted a fifth child for Helga and me, but it has not come yet."

Konrad chuckled and made a ribald comment about his brother. Everyone laughed except young Tanti, who had not understood it.

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He was more anxious to get back to the horse he would be riding the following morning.

The Hippodrome stables were under the care of a burly old man named Fritz Leiden, a former German soldier who'd remained in Russia after being freed from a prison camp after the war. He was good at his job and seemed to welcome newcomers he could impress. "You think you can race at the Hippodrome, boy?" he asked Tanti.

"I hope so, sir."

"A gypsy jockey! A rarity, surely, but not the first we've had. We'll see how you do on the track tomorrow and Tuesday morning."

"He's passed his twentieth birthday," Michael said. "He's no longer a boy."

"We'll see how he rides," Leiden said. He walked with a bit of a limp and Segar wondered if it was from an old war wound or a balky horse. "This is the oldest and most important of Russia's fifty-two racetracks. Not just anyone can ride at the Hippodrome. Arabian horses from Turkey were running here when Karl Marx was still a teenager." For all his pride, he might have been a native-born Russian. "I will be at the rail in the morning, watching you, boy."

True to his word, Fritz Leiden was out at 7:00 A.M. when Michael saddled up Rom Way and gave Tanti a hand up. There was no opportunity for sleeping in Konrad's apartment once the alarm had awakened them, so Captain Segar was there, too, feeling foolishly informal in the casual clothes his brother had provided. "You look like a police captain, Nicol," he'd told him, "even out of uniform. At least wear this shirt and pants so you look more like the rest of us on a day off at the racetrack. You and your gypsy friends are too colorful."

Michael led Rom Way onto the track, where a dozen other horses were already working out. He spoke a few words to Tanti and the jockey took the big chestnut around the first time at a canter, letting him grow accustomed to his surroundings. On the next lap, at a sign from Michael, the horse was speeded to a full gallop.

"Very good!" Konrad said, checking the time with his stopwatch. "He could be a winner against the second-rate horses here."

Michael was looking beyond Konrad, at something in the grandstand. "It seems as if we're not the only ones timing Rom Way. Isn't that the man we saw at your apartment?"

Konrad turned to follow his gaze. "Yes. Vladimir Kosok. I think I'll see what he's up to."

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After another gallop around the track, Tanti pulled up the horse and Michael decided it was enough for the first day. "Walk him around a bit and we'll give him another run tomorrow."

When Konrad returned to the group, Nicol knew his brother well enough to see that he was disturbed. "That Kosok is too interfering for his own good!" Konrad said. "He has some horses running on Wednesday and he's afraid this gypsy chestnut will run right over them. He wants us to skip that day and wait until Friday. I told him we would not."

"Did that satisfy him?" Segar asked.

"Oh, he made some threats about reporting me. He seems to think I'm making money on this horse somehow."

"Why do you put up with him?" said his brother. "He's only a trainer."

"We were friendly once. And we had some dealings. It was he who introduced me to Alexis, and she is still a friend of his."

"Do you owe him anything?"

Konrad thought for a moment and answered, "No, nothing. But in this country one must be careful of his enemies. A word spoken in the wrong place can be dangerous."

The conversation bothered Segar. As a police officer, he couldn't help wondering if his brother was involved in something shady. Suddenly the whole journey to Moscow with the gypsies and their horse seemed a mistake.

Michael continued to work out Rom Way on Tuesday, and the big horse circled the track a half second faster than before. They spent the morning at the track and then off sightseeing in the afternoon. Konrad was at work and was only able to join them in the evening. Surprisingly, it was Alexis who appeared on Wednesday morning, nodding briefly to Segar but obviously directing her attention toward Michael Vlado.

"How is your horse running?" she asked. "Should I bet him tonight?"

"There he is, just coming into the home stretch. Judge for yourself."

"He runs well. He runs like the gypsy outlaw he is."

"We are not all outlaws," Michael replied with a slight smile. Segar could not be sure, but the woman might have been flirting. "Tell me," she continued, "is it true that gypsy men must pay a bride-price for their women, the opposite of a dowry?"

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He nodded. "The custom exists in China and some other places, too. It is not exclusive with gypsies."

"And do you travel in caravans and deliver gypsy curses?"

"I am merely a farmer and horse breeder."

"Come now! Gypsies know many things."

They were standing by the rail and Tanti was just dismounting when there was a shout from the stable area. Fritz Leiden was calling for help. Segar broke into a run with the others following, his police training taking over by instinct. He reached the German and took him by the shoulders. "What's happened?"

"In there," Leiden said, pointing to the nearest stable.

Segar went in and bent over a man lying on his face in the straw. A wound to the head was open but there was very little blood. "He's dead," he told Michael.

"It's that Kosok fellow," Tanti said.

Segar lifted the man's head slightly and they saw that it was indeed Kosok. "Did you see anyone near here?" he asked Leiden.

"Only a stable boy with his wheelbarrow, doing his daily cleaning chores! I didn't see Kosok or anyone else!"

"You'd better call the police."

Later, as the police were completing their formalities, Alexis said, "I knew him quite well. Do you think I should admit it?"

"Not unless they ask you," Segar advised her. "Never lie to them, but don't volunteer anything, either."

"That's right—you're a police captain yourself, back in Romania."

"Konrad told us he met you through Kosok. What was the man, besides a horse trainer?"

She shrugged. "He gambled some. I don't know where he got his money."

The police had finished with Fritz Leiden, and Michael asked him: "Whose stable is this?"

"It belongs to Dmitri Ivanov. He trains several horses. All the stables along this side are his."

Ivanov himself soon appeared on the scene. He wore jodhpurs and riding boots, giving the appearance of an English country squire until he began conversing in Russian. That particular stable had been unoccupied, he said, since three of his horses had been shipped out to other tracks after Sunday's races. "Of course I knew Kosok," he replied to the police investigator's question. "He was at the track

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almost every day. Sometimes he trained horses, other times he just hung around. He was always eager to make an easy ruble or two."

The investigator, whose name was Nevsky, made notes in a black book. "Who were his enemies, his friends?"

A few names were mentioned, and Konrad Segar was one of them. It was Fritz Leiden who said he'd often seen the dead man talking with the official from the Agriculture Ministry. When Investigator Nevsky perked up at this, Segar wondered if the mention of a government official had made him nervous. Then one of the other detectives came over to Nevsky and told him they'd found something of interest and they moved off to another area of the stables, with Segar and the others following along.

"Do you think this will delay tonight's races?" Tanti asked anxiously.

"I doubt it," Michael replied. "They make a great deal of money from it. You'll get your chance to ride."

Nevsky and the other detective were examining one of the large wheelbarrows the stable boys used to remove horse manure during their cleaning chores. There seemed to be nothing in it but a pair of stable boy's overalls and a shirt. The pants cuffs had been turned up, but there was only a bit of straw in them. Then the detectives found something else in the folds of clothing—a large hypodermic needle of the sort used to inject horses. "Have its contents analyzed," Nevsky ordered.

The trainers and jockeys who had gathered around at the news of the killing gradually dispersed and Michael and Tanti went off to Rom Way's stable nearby. Tanti led the horse into the fresh straw and as he gave him a bucket of water Michael toed at the straw, deep in thought.

Segar was still following Investigator Nevsky about when Konrad arrived. Word of the murder had reached the Ministry office. "What happened here?" he demanded of the detective.

"A man named Vladimir Kosok was killed by a blow on the head. It seems to have happened an hour or two before the body was found. You knew the man, Comrade Segar?"

"I knew him, yes."

"When did you last see him?"

"I came here to ask questions, not answer them. My office is in charge of operations here, as you know."

"I understand that." Nevsky reached into a plastic evidence bag

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he was carrying. "You see, Comrade, this box of matches was found clutched in the dead man's hand."

Segar and his brother both stared at it. On the side of the box was the symbol of the Agriculture Ministry. Segar had seen some like it at Konrad's apartment. "He might have gotten that anywhere," Konrad said. "No doubt they've been left here on occasion by myself and others from the office."

"But he was clutching it as if he had just grabbed it from his killer. And we found a hypodermic needle, too. Its contents are being analyzed."

Konrad was grim-faced. "To answer your earlier question, I saw the dead man here yesterday morning while I was watching the horses work out."

"Very well." Investigator Nevsky made another note in his book.

Segar saw that he must take some action. "Perhaps you would allow me to aid in the investigation. I am a captain of police back in Romania."

"We can handle it quite well," the Russian assured him, closing his notebook and walking away.

"They suspect me," Konrad said. "I could see it in his eyes."

"Surely your position—"

"I am not important enough to sway a murder investigation."

"But you had no motive for killing Kosok."

"Some might think my love for Alexis was motive enough. He resented our affair. On Sunday when you saw him leaving my apartment, he had been there to warn me away from her."

"I didn't know," Segar said quietly.

"I must go find her."

"She was with us earlier, watching the workout. She may be with Michael at the stable."

They found her there, patting Rom Way while Michael brushed him down. When he heard of the latest developments, the gypsy was troubled. "We did not mean to bring you problems," he told Konrad.

"You have not brought them."

"I hope not. Some feel the coming of gypsies brings an ill wind."

"I urged you to come," Konrad reminded him. "I'll be cheering you on tonight."

Segar managed to get Michael aside. "The official police want none of my help. But you have aided me before in investigations. Do you see anything we might have missed?"

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"Many things," the gypsy said. "But let us await the results of the investigation, and of tonight's races."

Rom Way ran in the fourteenth race, near the end of the evening's card. He took an early lead and then dropped back as Michael and Segar cheered him on from the rail. Konrad and Alexis were there, too, adding their encouragement. One of Ivanov's horses had surged to the lead and Alexis shouted, "I hope he loses! Come on, Rom Way!"

Tanti used his whip just once, but it was enough to spur Rom Way on. He came even with Ivanov's horse and then, in the home stretch, edged him out by half a length. Rom Way had won his first big race.

The exhilaration they all felt in watching could hardly match Tanti Slatina's in riding the winner. He jumped down from his mount to accept Michael's enthusiastic hug and a kiss from Alexis. When they'd all calmed down, Segar saw Michael draw the young woman aside. "Why were you so anxious that Ivanov's horse lose?" he asked.

"Ivanov and Kosok were partners on that horse," she replied.

"Partners? The horses are owned by the state. The men were only trainers."

"Partners in wagering. They had a system for betting large sums of money—more than is allowed by law. They bribed a cashier to punch out extra tickets for them so they wouldn't have to run between windows buying them." She took a deep breath. "I wouldn't be telling you this if Vladimir were still alive. I really did love him once."

The small purse for winning the race was awarded and they started off to celebrate. There was talk of entering another race on Friday evening, but Fritz Leiden informed Michael that the Friday card was already full. "Perhaps on Sunday," he suggested.

That was when Investigator Nevsky appeared, grim-faced as ever. "I understand your gypsy horse was the winner," he said with a trace of distaste.

"You should have bet on him," Michael Vlado replied with ease. "The payoff was very good. If they posted odds, he would have gone at about ten to one."

"It is highly irregular for a privately owned horse to race at the Hippodrome, or anywhere in Russia. You must be aware of that. One wonders if Kosok was threatening to report this to the proper authorities."

"We received no money," Michael assured him. "Only the regular

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trainer and jockey fees and our percentage of the purse. Russian horses travel to Berlin and Düsseldorf. Certainly German horses race here on occasion. You know as well as I do you have no basis for threats."

Nevsky's lips twisted into a slight grin. It was the first time he'd attempted anything approaching a smile. "I can have you arrested on suspicion this very minute. No one will care what happens to a gypsy."

"Perhaps we'd make more sense if we worked together," Michael suggested.

"What sort of gypsy name is Michael, anyway?"

"A Romanian sort. I was named after King Michael, our country's last monarch before it became a communist state."

"And a poor communist state it is," Nevsky grumbled. "Neither a gypsy nor a Romanian receives my sympathy."

"If you intend to arrest me, tell me one thing first. What were the contents of that hypodermic needle?"

"Is that any business of yours?"

"It could be."

"The hypodermic contained a powerful stimulant. Any horse injected with it before a race would have a good chance of winning. However, the most routine urine test for drugs would have revealed it."

Michael-Vlado nodded. "Could I speak with you in private?"

"About what?"

"My theory on the case."

They walked away together while Segar watched. Michael was talking, explaining, and after some moments Nevsky started talking, too. They might have been having an argument. Finally they returned, and it was Nevsky who spoke. "Mr. Vlado has some interesting theories on the case."

"Could we all go someplace and talk?" Michael asked.

Tanti suggested a room where the jockeys relaxed before their races. With the last race about to be run, it was empty now except for Fritz Leiden, who was busy cleaning up. Nevsky led Michael, Tanti, Segar, Konrad, and Alexis inside. "Now tell them your theory."

"Yes," Michael said. "I thought of it when someone said they'd seen a stable boy by the place where Kosok's body was found. Why would he have been there? To clean the stables? But this is Wednesday morning and Ivanov had shipped off the horses that used those

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stables after Sunday's races. They would have been cleaned on Monday—or yesterday at the latest. Isn't that right, Fritz?"

"You're correct," Leiden agreed. "No stable boy should have been in that area this morning."

"But if it wasn't a real stable boy, who was it? The hypodermic needle tells us that. It was someone posing as a stable boy to get near the horses, to inject one of them with a powerful stimulant. As bad luck would have it, Kosok ran into him, probably recognized him as a fellow gambler, and got himself killed. I think if Investigator Nevsky checks on known gamblers with special interest in this evening's horses, he may find the killer."

Surprisingly, the Russian detective agreed. "You will all be leaving in the morning, going back to Romania?"

"I think it's best," Michael said over young Tanti's objections. "We've raced at the Hippodrome and won. Why press our luck?"

"Why indeed?" the Russian said.

After he'd gone, Segar took Michael aside. "What sort of story did you feed him earlier?"

"What I just said, as far as it went. I also told him that Kosok and Ivanov were gambling partners. And I told him about the scheme to bribe one of the cashiers."

"What about my brother?"

"He'll be all right as long as we don't race again. He made some big bets, too, didn't he?"

"I suppose so," Segar admitted. "I saw Alexis collecting some winnings after Rom Way won."

"You and I, we're better off back in Romania," Michael said.

Konrad saw them off in the morning. They stopped at the Hippodrome to pick up the horse trailer with Rom Way and said goodbye to Fritz Leiden. Then they headed south the way they had come. A summer mist hung over the valleys, and the sun was only starting to break through and warm the air.

"That was quite a trip," Tanti said. "Something I'll remember a long time."

"I should think so," Segar agreed. "Racing at the Hippodrome is something that happens once in a lifetime."

Michael was at the wheel, guiding the car and trailer along the divided highway. It wasn't until they left the main road that he relaxed and spoke. "In a way I'm sorry we went."

"Because of the murder?" Segar asked.

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"Yes."

"You think my brother killed him, don't you?"

"No. In fact I knew from the start that he was innocent. You see, the killer posed as a stable boy and Konrad couldn't have fit into those overalls. You'll remember the pantlegs were turned up, for a short person."

"Maybe it *was* one of the stable boys."

"No, he wouldn't have risked abandoning his overalls. Kosok's head wound left virtually no blood in the stable where we found him—that indicates he was killed elsewhere and dumped there."

"Someone carried the body in broad daylight?"

"Wheeled it would be more accurate. Kosok was a small man—his body would have fit into one of those big wheelbarrows the stable boys use. Covered with a tarp and a bit of straw, no one would see it. Remember, someone did notice a stable boy with a wheelbarrow near those stables. And I asked myself something else. Why was the stable boy's costume needed at all? Anyone could have pushed that wheelbarrow without attracting attention. Unless their regular clothes were distinctive enough to catch the eye."

Captain Segar felt uneasy. "What are you trying to say, Michael?"

"That the killer of Vladimir Kosok had to be a small person, like a jockey. That he had to be wearing eye-catching clothing, like a gypsy. That he had to have murdered Kosok in our stable, where fresh straw covered the bloodstains. Tanti, why did you kill him?"

They stopped the car at the side of the road while Tanti Slatina went off to the woods and was sick. Presently Michael and Segar followed him, and sat with him.

"I found him in the stable with that needle," Tanti said, sobbing it out with an emotion that shook his whole body. "He tried to bribe me to inject the stimulant into Rom Way. He said if I did it just before the race, Rom Way would win. What he really wanted was a disqualification so the horse he backed—Ivanov's horse—would win. When I refused, he said he'd inject Rom Way himself. We struggled and I hit him with a horseshoe. I didn't mean to kill him."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Segar asked. "Why did you move the body?"

"I—I wanted to race at the Hippodrome. I wanted it more than anything else on earth. If I admitted killing him, even by accident, I knew they'd put me in jail and I wouldn't race. So I put on the overalls and shirt and moved his body in a wheelbarrow to an empty

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stable. The hypodermic needle must have fallen into the wheelbarrow and I missed it."

Michael nodded. "You said it was Kosok before we turned over the body, though you barely knew him. That made me suspicious, and when I saw the fresh straw in our stable I searched the floor for bloodstains, and found them. But I had to let you ride."

"What if my brother had been arrested?" Segar asked Tanti quietly. "What about that box of matches in Kosok's hand?"

"I picked them up at his apartment for a souvenir. Kosok must have ripped them from my pocket during our struggle without me realizing it. Believe me, Captain, I would have confessed if Konrad was arrested. I still will."

Michael stood up, helping Tanti to his feet. "You just have, to a captain in the Romanian police."

Segar nodded, and followed them back to the car. He stood for a moment looking at Rom Way in the trailer, and then he got into the car with them. "It's out of my jurisdiction," he said at last. "Let's go home."

DETECTIVERSE

EDWARD D. HOCH

by THOMAS F. MOSIMANN

How does he do it? Does he eat? Does he sleep?
Are his burned-out typewriters piled in a heap?
Does his surname rhyme with soak or with sock—
Does he dictate stories around the clock?

How *does* he do it? Has his Muse no pity?
Is he a computer? Is he a committee?
Whatever the answer, it's just plain factural—
The guy is approaching the supernatural.

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Ed. Note: Soak.

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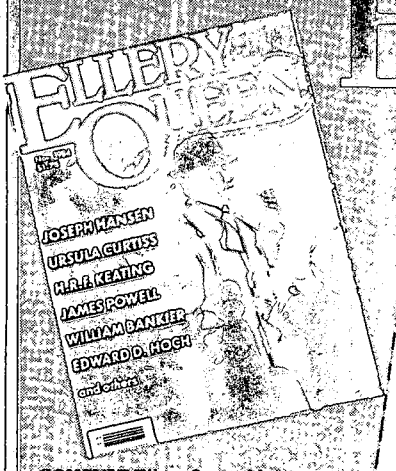

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An American couple savoring their last hours in Venice before moving on to Bologna, convinced that the most wonderful thing about travel is the unexpected encounters . . .

THE YO-YO MAN

by ADELE NUDEL

Marilyn and Thomas eat ice cream while they watch water lap against the bank of the Grand Canal. Little splashes. The moon casts an eerie glow on the gondola darkly gliding past their table. The boat is so close Marilyn can hear the passengers' murmurs. She hears a man talking about the liver they had for dinner. The woman laughs, an intimate sound drifting across the water. The gondola man stands erect as he rows, a stage prop in his straw hat and striped jersey. It's hard to believe all this isn't a stage prop, that a real gondola has just passed their table. Marilyn smiles at her husband.

"Our last copa sporte," he says, lifting the goblet in a toast.

"I love these things," Marilyn says. "Let's make them when we get home. —They won't taste the same, though."

A stocky hotel worker rushes by, wearing his apron. Marilyn shivers in the chill. Only she and her husband are sitting at the sidewalk café that fronts the entrance to their hotel. It is their last night in Venice. Impulsively she had said, as they started to undress for bed, "Let's go outside again. Let's not end our last night so soon."

They gaze at each other fondly. They touch fingers. It has been a very good ten years. A late marriage, there was enough money to travel abroad every year, enough to buy good drawings (which they prefer to paintings), enough to frequent auction houses looking for antique rugs. Certainly enough to afford a large sunny apartment at a very fine address and an excellent private school for their eight-year-old son. And they look good. Spas. Perennial dieting on the best foods. Swedish walking. And they have kept their minds open, consciously maintaining their sense of wonder.

They contribute regularly to the NAACP and the ACLU. Thomas

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likes to call himself a left-liberal on domestic issues and a liberal on foreign policy. Marilyn is involved with the arts, photography, and pottery. She doesn't label herself politically but she's proud when her husband airs his views at the dinner table. He knows so much.

This summer Marilyn wears pinks and cranberries and plums, colors that go well with her dark hair and olive complexion. Tonight she wears a cranberry cotton dress and a plum-colored silk scarf around her hair to ward off the wind. Thomas gave a great deal of thought to packing. Tonight he wears lemon linen pants, polka-dot rayon braces, and a white shirt.

They loosen fingers and return to their copa sportes. They don't immediately notice the young man, not until he is asking if he may share their table—the waiter is reluctant to set up another table at this late hour. Of course, of course, they smile up at him, replying brightly. They see what he is, naturally, but they know so many people like him. (Not intimately, but they have *met* them.) And this is the wonderful thing about travel, these unexpected encounters.

The young man seats himself in a long graceful swoop. His teeth gleam white and perfect as he introduces himself. His name is Warren and he is an American. May he buy them wine? Flicking a finger at the waiter, he orders in rapid Italian.

"How did you learn the language?" asks Thomas, impressed.

"A barter," Warren says. "An Italian friend in New York gave me lessons, and I taught him how to play chess. But of course not well enough to beat me."

Marilyn is admiring. "Still, it must have taken you a long time to learn, it's a difficult language."

Dryly, he says, "We were together a long time."

Marilyn chatters like a hostess. She says they, too, are from New York. They exchange information about their neighborhoods and their cats. He has just arrived in Venice and, yes, it *is* impossible to find a decent place to stay without reservations—that's why he's temporarily in a pensione near the railroad station. It's seedy, but seedy can be a gas. Not funky, *seedy*. Marilyn and Thomas nod seriously, considering the words and their nuances.

Warren's eyes flicker at three boys passing, then they discuss film. It turns out they are all film buffs. Warren offers the information that he is a sometimes-architect. A swift look passes between husband and wife. Apparently he has an independent income. Parents who live in a large gingerbread house on the Island? Thomas an-

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nounces that he is the senior editor of a house that publishes science books. Marilyn modestly states that she owns a small photographic gallery in SoHo and she's opening a new show in the fall, August Sander's work. She really wants to move uptown, though.

The handsome Sicilian waiter is refilling their glasses. Warren stares at him. Robust German beerhall songs are heard from another passing gondola. The water laps against the curb.

They sip their wine in silence. Marilyn suspects the young man finds them dull. She absently looks at the woman seated at the doorway of their hotel. Stout and corseted, small ankles crossed, she wears a housedress—she's probably the manager's wife or the cook. Marilyn tells herself she is not dull, she will not feel defensive. Dr. Klingman would tell her to dialogue. "I, Marilyn, know I am not a dull woman. I graduated from Smith. I am *interesting*. How many women does he know who own photographic galleries? And we are not staying at one of those tourist hotels near the square, we—"

"Yo-yo! Yo-yo!"

They look up.

An old man is walking toward their table, rapidly working a yo-yo. Buzzing, fizzling with colors, it dazzles, twirls, dances. The man pauses at their table, watching Warren as he works the toy. His face is that of an old man, but his flirtatious look is young. Is he wearing rouge? Marilyn hopes so, it would be so precious. She scans his rumpled white suit and panama hat appreciatively—*very* Graham Greene.

"Yo-yo? Yo-yo?" the man croons, watching Warren. Warren turns away haughtily. Marilyn shoots a nervous smile at the old man. She wishes Warren wasn't so rude.

The old man takes a step forward. Warren glares. "Scum!" he growls. "Get away!" The old man shrugs and walks on.

Thomas says, "Oh, come now. He's just an old man trying to make a dollar."

With aloof sternness, Warren says, "That's how *you* see him. He's a dirty old man who doesn't know when to give up. Did you notice how *old* he is?" Neither husband nor wife answer. Each is aware of being older than the boy.

Warren drinks his wine and slowly his face relaxes. Have they seen the film festival at the Lido? he asks. Yes, oh, yes. Animatedly, they discuss the films and the filmmakers.

A while later Marilyn sees the yo-yo man walking back toward

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them. Warren and Thomas follow her look. He is jaunty as he strides toward them, working the toy and smiling at Warren. Warren bangs his glass down hard and purple wine splashes on the white tablecloth. Marilyn mops up the wine with her napkin. Thomas coughs nervously. Warren mutters an apology and Marilyn gives him a sprightly look, as though he has inadvertently broken a glass in her Riverside Drive apartment and not to worry. The yo-yo man's hip is against the table now. He works the yo-yo, not looking at them. Warren looks stonily ahead, his arms folded tightly across his chest.

Thomas says to his wife, "Let's go in." She looks uncertain. Suddenly, Warren's face changes. He frantically waves at a slight blond boy reading the window menu and calls to him. The boy breaks into a pleased smile and bounds toward them. Warren stands. "Jamie!" The boys exclaim, rumple each other's hair, and then consult in low, tense voices. Then Warren turns to Marilyn and Thomas and says, "This is my friend Jamie. We were together in Rome. You will excuse us? It's been lovely. Have a super time in Bologna."

Alone now, the couple take measure of each other wryly. Isn't this what travel is all about?

"Shall we turn in?"

"Yes, let's."

"Are you sleepy?"

"I could sleep."

"Look!" Thomas exclaims. "He's still here. I thought he was gone."

The yo-yo man is standing with his back to them at the corner of the sidewalk. His shoulders slump and the yo-yo dangles from his hand.

"Let's offer him a nightcap," Marilyn says.

"Why?"

"It's our last night, Thomas—we can afford a generous gesture. Where will he go—to a furnished room with a bare lightbulb?"

"Don't exaggerate, darling. All right, but only for one drink."

They call to the yo-yo man in unison. The old man hesitates, then turns around and shuffles toward them, looking confused. With gestures, they indicate he is invited to sit, to be their guest, to have a drink. He ingratiatingly smiles and sits down.

"It's all right," he announces in precise English. "I, too, am from the States. We can speak English."

They stare.

"I came after the Conflict."

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The Conflict?

"Ah, I see you do not know the term. It is a word some Italians use to describe the Second World War. A diplomatic term. It offends no one—the Americans or the Germans. After all, we depend on both for our tourism industry."

Thomas is astounded. "You've stayed on all these years?"

"Yes, I came to see the art and I stayed."

Marilyn asks, "Do you paint?"

"No. But this city is a compatible place." Then he asks, "That boy—do you know him well?"

Marilyn explains that they do not know Warren at all, it was a chance encounter, he merely sat down with them.

"What is his last name?"

Thomas says they do not know his last name, they never asked.

The old man coughs and delicately places his hankerchief over his nose and mouth. He peers at them over the handkerchief. "Do you know what he is?"

Offended, Thomas says, "Of course."

The waiter approaches. They urge the old man to order whatever he wishes. He asks if they would mind if he has a coffee. Do, they say—and would he like a cake? Please have a cake, they are delicious.

They give the order. When the waiter leaves, the old man sighs. "Are you sure he didn't mention his last name?" he asks. They shake their heads and Marilyn hurries to change the subject.

"Do you sell yo-yos all the time?"

The old man's eyes are cold. He hasn't forgiven them for not knowing Warren's last name. "No, Madame. During the night I sell the toy. During the day I am a shill. I lure tourists like yourselves to Murano, where your glass beads are made. And then I lure tourists to buy expensive glass chandeliers as well as glass beads. Of course, I earn a commission on whatever they buy. Are you perhaps in the market for an expensive chandelier?"

Thomas says, "It sounds lucrative."

"It is."

Marilyn is confused. The old man beams at her in a theatrical, grandfatherly way.

"Ah, I see what you would like to ask me. Why do I sell yo-yos at night when I do so well during the day? I sell yo-yos at night, Madame, as a way of meeting pretty boys in this decadent-boy town." His eyes are mocking. "Do I shock you?"

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No, no, she hastens to say. Thomas is silent.

The old man looks at them with obvious dislike. He spends the next minutes wolfing down the cake, sipping coffee in between bites. Once he has eaten, his humor seems to improve. He compliments Thomas on his polka-dot suspenders. Thomas relents, smiles.

"You are an attractive couple," the yo-yo man says, appraising them.

They thank him, pleased.

"I, too, was part of a couple," he confides. "My friend and I were together for many years. He died two years ago."

Oh! They express condolence. At this moment he seems like a widower, not what he was before.

Almost shyly, he asks, "Would you like to see a picture of him?" They say yes. He carefully takes a photograph out of his wallet. They see a bland-looking man in his sixties staring into the camera. He could be a businessman, a clerk, a salesman. They make appropriate remarks: an intelligent-looking man, a sensitive-looking man.

He is appreciative and puts the photograph away. "When I came here, I was a beautiful boy. That's hard to realize now, isn't it? They said I had a Michelangelo head. Well, that was a long time ago. When I met my friend, I wasn't so pretty any more, I was ordinary-looking. No one can help that, when their looks go. Well, anyway, he didn't care what I looked like. He loved me. We were together for over thirty years. That's a long time, isn't it? He got cancer. He hated being sick. He hated hospitals, he was afraid of them. I took care of him in our apartment until the night he died."

He reminds Marilyn of her father, who took care of her mother before she died. She reaches out and briefly touches his hand.

He sighs. "I'm afraid of another long-term commitment. I don't want to lose someone else. I don't think I have the strength for it."

She understands. Her father felt like that.

"So," he says, "I now pick up boys for the night. No commitment, no hurt." He pauses. "No, there is hurt. They use me."

"What do you mean?" Thomas asks.

"I give them money."

"Why?"

The old man barks a laugh. "Do you think they'd want me for my looks?"

He adds, "I repel them. You saw how your friend reacted to me. Sometimes they're cruel."

"So why do you do it?" Thomas asks.

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There is a reflective silence. The old man says, "I miss being touched. Held. After a long relationship, the relationship I had with my friend, I need to be *touched*. Can you understand that?"

Marilyn's father had more or less said the same thing when she had visited him a year after her mother had died. She nods.

Thomas looks thoughtful.

After more silence, the old man suddenly smiles brilliantly. "Enough of my troubles! Tell me, is New York like they say it is? Are the streets filled with garbage? Have you been mugged?"

They laugh. He could be a guest in their home, crossing his legs, smiling charmingly. No, they say, we've never been mugged, but we do have more than one lock on our door and our windows are grilled. Our son is being brought up in the city, but of course he goes to a private school.

The old man nods. "We brought my nephew up, my friend and I. We sent my sister in New Jersey money every month to raise him. But she didn't know my friend contributed half. She didn't know he existed."

A straight lady? they ask. Yes, he says, a pious Catholic lady. She was widowed young. She had this child and of course we wanted to help. We saw him through college and now he's a teacher.

He digs in his pocket, takes out the wallet again, and passes them a photograph of a boy who looks around fifteen.

"Is this the most recent photograph you have of him?" Marilyn asks.

"Yes. My sister never wanted me to meet him or see photographs of him as an adult. Being what I am."

"But she took your money!"

His face flushes. "It's all right," he says.

Marilyn is showing him a photograph of their son when they hear Warren's voice. They look up and see the two boys walking toward them, their arms linked. As they pass the table, Warren nodding slightly at Marilyn and Thomas, the yo-yo man suddenly stands and grabs his sweater sleeve. "Hello!" he exclaims.

Warren pulls away. His voice is violent. "Get your hands off me, you pig! Touch me and I'll kill you, I swear!"

Jamie pulls him away and the boys break into a run.

The old man calls after Warren, "What's your name? Where are you staying?"

Marilyn and Thomas are frozen. They hear the old man philo-

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sophically say, "He is young. He doesn't know any better. I can easily find where he's staying." He drops in the chair again. "I could show him things in Venice he doesn't know exist. The paintings in the churches. The little churches."

"You *see* his attitude," Thomas says. "Why would you persist?"

The old man's voice trails off. "Venice is small. I could find him."

Marilyn looks at her husband. He says, "Marilyn, we have to get up early. Let's go to bed now."

The next morning Marilyn sits in the hotel lobby, with its potted ferns, smoked mirrors, red-plush settees, and marble-topped tables. Thomas is at the desk, paying their bill. He is in a good mood. Last night is in the past, a chapter in their travels, an episode to be told and retold, with embellishments, in the years to come.

Soon he drops down beside her. "Well," he says, "that's that. We have only two suitcases. I don't think we need a porter to take us to the vaporetto, do you?" She agrees. They take great pride in traveling light.

Breakfast is included in the bill, and they again sit at the sidewalk café, which looks very different with the bright shafts of sunlight on the awnings. Gondolas pass, filled with vegetables, taking produce to the nearby Rialto Market. The waiter brings a basket of fresh croissants and a dish with pats of butter. "Coffee?" he asks. "Tea," says Thomas. "Black coffee, please," says Marilyn.

Afterward, they can't find seats on the crowded water bus. They cling to the railing as the vaporetto lumbers side to side, moving away from the pier. "Old boats," Thomas says.

The vaporetto passes the coquettish, crumbling palaces lining the Grand Canal that look like icing on cakes. Marilyn thinks the yo-yo man looked like one of these palaces. *Was* he wearing rouge?

As it approaches the railroad station, the boat swerves and lurches to a stop.

In the railroad station, Thomas looks at his watch. "We board in a few minutes."

Marilyn says, "Let's eat lunch on the train!" She loves this particular train and the elegant lunches on the run to Rome.

"We might be in Bologna before lunch, but why not?" Thomas says.

"I shall have veal," she exclaims, "and those tiny browned potatoes." They beam at each other. They will stop in Bologna for two

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days and eat more wonderful food. Picking up their luggage, they make their way to the open area where the train is pulling in.

Suddenly there is agitated noise, raised voices. People are clustering toward the front of the station. It is one of those frustrating times when they are sorry they don't speak the language. A man standing next to them, wearing a shiny suit and carrying an attaché case, is watching and listening. Thomas says, "Pardon me, do you speak English? Do you know what's going on?"

The man looks distractedly at Thomas. "Yes. A man has just been found dead in back of a nearby pensione."

"A man?"

"Yes. You wouldn't know who he is, but he was a fixture in Venice. He was called the yo-yo man."

"What did he die of?" Marilyn's voice is high. "A heart attack?"

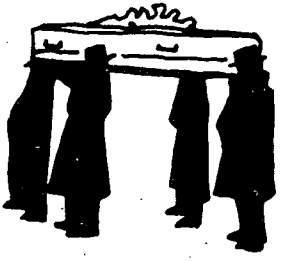
"He was murdered," the man says and hurries toward the train.

Marilyn and Thomas stare at each other in horror. They grab each other's hands. People rush past them. Thomas's voice is tight. "Let's go. We'll miss the train."

Marilyn says, "Yes." She doesn't move.

Thomas resolutely takes her arm and she allows him to pull her toward the train and up the steps.

They slowly make their way up the aisle. Then, passing a compartment, they see Warren. He is sitting alone, his legs crossed, and, recognizing them, he smiles widely and waves.



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All she had to do, Logan told Katie, was keep her head and do exactly what he said . . .

ACCIDENTALLY YOURS

by DONALD OLSON

At midnight Katie turned off the television and was listening for the sound of Logan's car when the phone rang.

"Katie, I've got to make this short—"

"Darling, where *are* you? I've been worried."

"Don't say anything, just listen. I had an accident. I'm okay, just a bit woozy. The car hit a guy. He was walking on the wrong side, hitchhiking. It was raining—I didn't even *see* him."

"Logan!"

"Please, just listen and do what I say! The guy's dead. I panicked. I'd had a few drinks in Garvey. I put him in the car and rammed it into a tree. I switched IDs with him. I don't know how soon they'll find him. It happened on Stoneledge Road—not much traffic. Now listen closely, sweetheart. Everything depends on you. When they call, you'll have to identify the body. *You must say it's me.* We're still strangers around here. No one will know—"

"Logan, stop! Do you know what you're saying? Are you *drunk?*"

He didn't sound drunk. Frantic, yes—but never more coherent, which somehow added a more alarming frightfulness to his words. Impatiently, as if she were the one making no sense, he said, "It's too late to argue about it, Katie. It's done. The guy's name is McCall. I'll check into a motel under his name. You think we've had a run of bad luck so far—this would destroy us. They'd have me for manslaughter at the very least. Look, I know it sounds crazy, but this is our *chance.* Thank God we didn't drop that insurance. A hundred thousand, sweetheart! The answer to everything. I know it sounds wild, but it'll work. All you have to do is keep your head and do exactly what I say."

Manslaughter at the very least. Possibly it was the enormity of

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what this chilling phrase implied that in the end defeated Katie's moral will to resist her husband's appeal. The idea was monstrous and utterly mad, offensive to her every instinct. Yet despite her angry threat to do it herself if he wouldn't she could no more have picked up the phone and called the police than she could have flipped the switch at her husband's execution had he deliberately caused the death of a hundred hitchhikers. She agreed to do what he asked, but with an icy fatalism of despair, knowing it couldn't possibly succeed and that she would be left with only the barren comfort of knowing it was not *she* who had failed *him*.

Such was her state of mind that there was no need to simulate shock when the call came from the police informing her of an accident on Stoneledge Road and requesting her to come to the hospital in Garvey as soon as possible. Just before the taxi arrived, she took a last glimpse of her face in the mirror beside the door and thought with a shock of unrecognition, This is what I'll look like when I'm old. A once pretty face but with color gone, lips pinched, eyes of a ghost—and she would be always cold like this, cold to the very bone.

She was greeted at the hospital by a state trooper named Burrows, built like a bear but dapper as an operetta hero in his uniform. The moment Katie saw the concern in his eyes she became possessed by a saving sense of unreality. Her mind rejected the terrible phone call from Logan as no more than an extrasensory prevision of the truth: Logan himself *was* dead. No hitchhiker, no bizarre switch of identities, no attempt to deceive and defraud. It would be Logan's body she would be required to identify.

"I know," she said before the trooper could do more than introduce himself, "he's dead. My husband's dead."

"He's in surgery at the moment, Mrs. Darroch, but he's alive."

Alive. The word seemed to confirm the delusionary nature of Logan's call. There *was* no dead hitchhiker. Logan himself was injured, but alive.

"His car went off Stoneledge Road and hit a tree. So far as we yet know he suffered a concussion, bruises, and a broken leg. He was still unconscious when they brought him in so I haven't been able to question him. I know how upsetting this is, but maybe you can help. Does your husband have any history of coronary problems? Any other condition that might cause him to black out?"

Katie shook her head. "None that I know of."

"The reason I ask, there were no skid marks. Of course it's possible

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he could have fallen asleep at the wheel. Forgive me for asking, but is your husband a heavy drinker, Mrs. Darroch?"

"No, not ordinarily. Only, well, sometimes when he's upset."

Knowing there was no need to dissemble, certain now that it *was* Logan they were talking about, Katie answered the questions without evasion. Logan had gone for a job interview at some company north of Garvey that afternoon. He was a salesman. Things hadn't been going too well back home in the Chicago suburb and they had decided to try a change of locale. They had lived here only a few weeks.

At length, looking over Katie's shoulder, the trooper put aside his pad and pencil. Katie turned. Down the long bright corridor, a green-garbed doctor was approaching.

He was even more reassuring than the trooper: mild concussion, bruises, a fractured right leg. After that, Katie had to wait another hour before Logan was out of the recovery room and she could see him.

He lay on his back, asleep, his right leg elevated and in a cast. His head was swathed in surgical dressings, only the eyes, the mouth, and part of the nose visible. Katie stood by the bed looking down at him.

"He'll be asleep for several hours," the nurse told her. "But you needn't worry. He was very lucky."

Except for one thing, Katie might have been deceived for more than those first few seconds.

The man had no moustache. It was not Logan.

The nightmare returned.

When the phone rang it was not the police, as she had supposed, but Logan. Katie tried to picture the look on his face as she told him the man was alive. His voice betrayed nothing—neither relief nor anxiety—scarcely any emotion at all until she began raving into the phone and then his tone grew sharp with impatience.

"Katie, for God's sake, don't fall apart on me."

"But we can't wait a minute longer. He could be awake by now. He could have told them everything. I keep expecting the police to call. You've got to tell them the truth. Tell them you panicked. Tell them you don't remember anything that happened. Tell them you blacked out. You don't remember switching IDs, or how the man got in the car— Logan?"

He replied in a tone of gloomy resignation. "Yes. Maybe you're

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right. Pretty flimsy, but I suppose they might go for it. Only they'll wonder why you didn't tell them it wasn't me."

"I could see hardly any of his face—and I could have assumed they might have to shave his lip."

"No. I'll get rid of my moustache."

She asked where he was, but he refused to name the motel. "It's better if you don't know. And I can't just show up all of a sudden. Not if I'm supposed to have amnesia. Listen, go back to the hospital. If he's awake and talking, you'll have to put on a good act. You're shocked, confused. You haven't heard from me. Then come home. I'll call you, pretend I've just come to my senses. We'll take it from there. If they don't believe me, well—"

"They won't, I know they won't! Oh, darling, why did you even think of doing anything so insanely reckless?"

"Katie, I could have *sworn* the guy was dead. At the time it seemed like a good idea."

It could have been a commentary on all that had happened in their two years of marriage: so many ideas that had *seemed* good.

She clung to the one positive fact. "At least he's alive, Logan. You didn't kill him. No matter what happens, they can't do anything too awful."

Logan agreed humorlessly. "Yeah, maybe we'll be lucky. And the guy can hardly sue us. We've got nothing."

"We've got each other."

"If that's any consolation to you."

She pictured his face—lean, handsome, the sulky, bitter-edged smile. "You know it is, darling. Please, come home now. We'll go to the hospital together."

"No. I'll call you in an hour. Then we'll decide what's best."

I'll call you. Another familiar phrase. It sometimes seemed to Katie that she had talked with Logan more on the telephone than face to face during their married life. His jobs, all of them short-lived, had kept him away from home for weeks on end. At least in Chicago, where they had met, she had had friends—although no family. Her parents lived in California and had not yet met Logan.

The nurse's air of indomitable cheer, betraying no hint of accusation, suggested McCall must still be asleep. But then she said: "I told your husband you'd be here any minute now, Mrs. Darroch."

"He's awake?" Katie stared into the woman's frank blue eyes, searching for some trace of irony. "You've talked with him?"

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"Oh, now, there's not a thing to fret about, dear. His mind's perfectly clear. It was only a mild concussion."

As soon as she entered the room, the man opened his eyes and turned his head toward her. They stared at each other. His hand, lying on the white coverlet, moved slightly.

"Shut the door," he said quietly. Then he beckoned her closer. Still holding his gaze, she eased herself onto the chair.

"How are you feeling?" she asked him, fast losing her composure under the scrutiny of McCall's heavy-lidded brown eyes.

"Confused. Curious. So tell me, who are you? What's the game?"

"Katie. Katie Darroch. You don't remember what happened?" It seemed the only possible explanation to give.

"I remember being run down."

"But haven't you told them who you really are? Everything?"

"I haven't told them a blessed thing, lady." And then, with a glint of sardonic amusement, "Yet. So give. Are you the one who racked me up?"

She leaned forward, her voice an urgent whisper. "No. Oh, please try to understand. I'm so terribly sorry. It's been so awful. I—"

"Hey, don't go all weepy on me. I'll begin to think you really are my wife—if I had one. Now give it to me straight, and you better make it fast before they throw you out."

She stammered her way through the story she and Logan had contrived, but quickly became muddled and admitted she had heard from Logan. He had called her, she said, remembering nothing about what had happened. "He was in shock," she said. "He would never have done such a thing otherwise. You must believe that. We'll do all we can to make things right."

Framed in bandages, the parody of a smile touched his lips. "Are you saying you haven't told the cops? Or anybody else?"

"Logan and I—we'll tell them together."

His hand crept toward her—a big, well manicured hand. "You know what you'll be letting yourself in for, don't you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Like hell it doesn't. Now listen. We'll make a deal. I say nothing, you say nothing. Understand? It'll be our little secret."

She had been prepared for anything but this. "Why? Why should you want to help us?"

"You? I'm thinking about myself. And don't ask any questions. I got my reasons. So you just keep up the act. You're my wife, I'm

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your husband." And then, with a droll, conspiratorial wink: "Accidentally yours, baby."

"It's a shakedown" was Logan's immediate assessment of McCall's willingness to hide the truth. "He knows he's got us over a barrel. Didn't you tell him we don't have any money?"

"He didn't say anything about money. He just told me not to ask questions." She held the phone closer to her mouth as if to bring Logan closer. "Darling, it's crazy. It won't work. No good can come out of prolonging the deception."

"Look, the guy's doing us a favor, whatever his reasons are. How long is he going to be in the hospital?"

"Only a few days."

"Okay, so we bide our time until we know what he wants."

"Darling, I don't like it. We should tell the truth before it's too late."

"Are you kidding? It's already too late."

"When are you coming home?"

"I'm not. Not yet. If someone saw me— Look, for now I'm Darrell McCall. I'm registered here under his name. His wallet was stuffed with big bills, so I'm okay for money. Don't worry, sweetheart. We lucked out. Everything will turn out fine."

That remark, too, had a disturbingly familiar ring.

Hours of exposure to the bizarre plots of endless TV melodramas hadn't prepared Katie for the predicament in which she found herself when Darrell McCall was brought "home" in an ambulance and settled in the spare bedroom of the small rented house on the outskirts of Garvey: her husband masquerading as another man while hiding out in a motel; herself occupying the house with a stranger pretending to be her husband, a man she knew virtually nothing about and whose motives remained as deep a mystery as on the first day she had spoken to him.

In the beginning she had no idea what attitude to adopt toward him. His presence was a worrisome intrusion she gravely resented, while at the same time she felt obliged to be grateful to him for sparing her and Logan what might have proved infinitely more unpleasant consequences had he chosen to tell the truth about the accident. She had hoped that once McCall and she were alone in the house he might be more forthcoming about his purpose in continuing the deception, but instead he was even more evasive.

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"It suits me to be incommunicado for a while," he said. "In a way, painful as it was, your husband did me a favor by running into me that night."

"You mean you're running away from something?"

"Who isn't? Running away from the past, or from the future. Which are you doing?"

Katie set his breakfast tray on the edge of the bed. "Neither."

"Then what are you doing in this dump? You said you'd only been here a few weeks."

"Logan was tired of the city. There was nothing to look forward to."

"So you were running away from the future."

"You might say that, I suppose."

"I can't figure you out, Katie. You're a good-looking kid. Bright. Obviously well educated. How come you married a jerk?"

"He's not a jerk," Katie retorted. "Logan's a wonderful man."

"And he pulls a dopey stunt like this? Leaves you alone here with a guy he doesn't know from Adam?"

"What choice did he have? And I'm sure he realizes you're no threat to me, laid up with a broken leg."

"Which reminds me, I'd better start learning to get around on those crutches they gave me at the hospital. How soon's your car going to be fixed?"

"By Wednesday, they said. Why?"

He smiled. "I'll hardly be in shape to hitchhike. Besides, that's not my style."

"Then why were you doing it?"

He grunted, as if this recalled something disagreeable. "It suited me."

"Are you saying you intend to take our car when you leave?"

"*Your* car? It belongs to Logan Darroch, doesn't it? I'm Logan Darroch, remember?" He laughed at her expression. "Relax, Katie. Is that what worries you? That I'm going to put the squeeze on you and hubby? Bleed you dry?" He flung a scornful glance around the tiny room. "Fat chance, I'd say."

"You mean you'll simply take the car and go?"

"I didn't say that. Suppose we leave the negotiations until your hubby shows up tonight."

As he had promised, Logan came to the house shortly after ten that night, driving a rented car. On Katie's part, the reunion was

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tearful. "I was beginning to think I'd never see you again," she cried. "It's been so dreadful."

"I know, I know. But it won't be for much longer."

In the guest room, Logan at once assumed the air of a casual visitor calling upon a sick friend, his manner aggressively jaunty. As if taking his cue from this, McCall smiled affably. "No flowers? No champagne?"

"I'll save the champagne till this is over," said Logan. "So tell us, McCall. What made you agree to go along with this?"

"That's not important. I think the fewer questions we ask each other the better it'll be. I doubt you'd believe me no matter what I told you—any more than I buy your story that you acted out of panic that night. You don't strike me as a guy who loses his cool that easily. *Or* that stupidly. Hell, you didn't even make sure I'd croaked. You pull a stunt like that, chances are you hoped it would pay off. But I'm not asking, chum. I'm not even curious."

At the word "stupidly," Logan's hospitable air had vanished. "Okay, McCall. No questions, except one. What is it you want?"

"Only what you can give me. Not money. I can lay my hands on all of that I need. What I want from you is a new identity. You sort of dumped that right in my lap. I want to know more about you, Logan. And I want documents. Your social-security card, your birth certificate, your credit cards, your driver's license, your passport if you've got one. I don't want to waste time shopping around for phony ID. And this will be safer."

Logan's look of guarded suspicion faded into a smirk. "So you're some sort of crook. I might have guessed."

"I'm not wanted by the cops if that's what you're thinking. And the new Logan Darroch is going to be a model citizen. Now, am I being unreasonable? Considering the alternative?"

Logan tried to project an aspect of bold self-confidence. "If we tell the truth now, you'll be part of the collusion."

"Don't try to bluff me, friend."

Katie didn't like the look on Logan's face—a mixture of relief, mild uncertainty, and budding satisfaction. "Darling, don't do it," she said. "The truth will be safer in the long run."

McCall shook his head. "Baby, there's a time to tell the truth and you missed the bus. It's too late. Your hubby knows that."

"He's right, Katie. I know I've messed things up for us but it's the only way out. What have we got to lose?"

"Our identity, if nothing else!"

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"So what the hell good has my identity ever been to me? He's welcome to it." He turned to McCall. "So that's the deal?"

"That's the deal, buddy. One more thing. I should be able to get out of here in about three or four days. Until then, you stay clear of this place. You may not have any close neighbors but why take the risk?"

"No!" Katie sprang from her chair and grabbed Logan's arm. "It's been awful not having you here with me. You can stay out of sight, not leave the house—there's no need—"

"I'll be the judge of that," McCall snapped. Logan uttered only a mild, perfunctory protest, then looked at Katie with a helpless shrug.

The next afternoon, McCall, watching Katie change the linen on his bed while he practiced hobbling about the room on crutches, seemed amused by her glumly unresponsive mood.

"Katie, I'm sorry about calling your old man a jerk. All I meant was, well, you might say it takes one to know one."

"You're calling yourself a jerk?"

"I've been called worse. What I really meant was, a guy who's been around as much as I have develops an instinct about people, certain types of people. Tell me it's none of my business if you want, but has Logan ever been in trouble before?"

"What's the matter? Are you afraid you might be stuck with the identity of a man with a prison record?"

"You mean he *has* been in trouble?"

"Don't be ridiculous. If you knew Logan you wouldn't even suggest such a thing." She wasn't about to tell an almost total stranger about Logan's little misunderstanding with his latest employer. And she never did believe they'd had any right to fire him. It wasn't his fault he had trusted the wrong people. He certainly hadn't deliberately tried to cheat the company.

"I wonder how well *you* know him," McCall said. "You're very naive in a way, Katie. I mean that as a compliment."

"If you're afraid you can't trust Logan, why don't you just forget—"

"I don't have to trust him. He has to trust me. Look, I'm only telling you this for your own good. One of these days that guy's going to give you a lot of heartache. You'd be better off without him."

"Evidently your instincts aren't terribly reliable."

He shrugged. "Time will tell. I'll bet it was Logan's idea you two move up here. What was the attraction?"

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"The country. Logan always wanted to live in the country. And he used to come up here when he was a salesman for a computer systems company."

"You mean he has friends here?"

"Not in Garvey. And not really friends."

There followed a long silence, during which McCall, leaning heavily on his crutches, seemed deep in thought. Finally he said: "Suppose I were to tell you it might not have been an accident, Logan running me down with his car."

This drew a blast of contempt. "That's absurd!"

"Yeah, maybe. But I'm a pretty observant guy. When I blew into Garvey, I was in a bar having a few drinks. I asked the barman about thumbing on the expressway—whether the cops frowned on it. There was a guy in a booth behind me—I didn't pay much attention to him, but I think it might have been your man. I could be mistaken, of course."

"What exactly are you implying?"

"That Logan might have cooked up a little scheme on the spur of the moment to defraud the insurance company. If he knew I was hitchhiking and heard me tell the bartender I'd never been in this part of the country before, he could have followed me. Dark rainy night, not much traffic."

"If you believe that, you might as well accuse us both."

"You're square, Katie. I'll bank on that. I have my doubts about Logan."

"I'm sure the feeling is mutual."

"You were right, you know. There was no reason he couldn't have holed up right here in the house until I split."

"Then why did you insist he stay at the—where he is?"

"The Vistaway Motel? Oh, don't look so startled. I'm not as dumb as your husband. While you were out this morning I amused myself by calling around to all the area motels until I hit the one where a Darrell McCall was registered."

"Why should it matter to you *where* he is?"

"It doesn't matter," he replied with one of his enigmatic smiles. "Not to *me*."

After the first night she had spent alone in the house with McCall, Katie had resigned herself to not getting any proper sleep. It wasn't that she felt herself to be in any personal danger from him—in fact, his attitude often implied a genuine sympathy for the predicament

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in which Logan's disastrously ill-advised act had placed her. It wasn't his presence so much as Logan's absence that kept her awake until long after midnight—that and her mind's nightly ride on what Logan had often called her "worry-go-round" of fears and uncertainties about what lay ahead even after the present crisis was over.

On this particular night, on Monday, she felt more restless than usual. Desperate for a full night's sleep, she had decided to get up and take a sedative from the vial McCall had been given before leaving the hospital when she heard him stirring in the room down the hall. She turned her head and glanced at the luminous dial of the alarm clock. It was a few minutes past two. Listening, fully alert now, she heard McCall's door open quietly. She assumed he was heading for the bathroom until, very clearly in the utter stillness of the house, she caught the unmistakable sound of the phone being dialed in the living room.

McCall hadn't once used the phone, at least while she was in the house. Wondering who he could be calling at this time of night, she slid out of bed, tiptoed to the door, and opened it soundlessly.

"I told you, never mind who this is," she heard him whisper, "just pass the tip on to Manny. He'll thank you for it. Tell him if he's going to act on it he better do it in the next couple of days." Katie sensed rather than heard him cradle the phone.

Back in bed, she knew there was no hope now of falling asleep. Meaningless as they were to her, his words kept her awake until dawn.

On the way to the garage Wednesday afternoon, Katie wished there was some way she could persuade Logan to tell the truth about the accident. Since overhearing McCall on the phone on Monday night, she trusted him less than ever. And surely Logan had been right in what he had said to McCall about collusion. How could any judge hold Logan responsible when the victim of the accident himself had been party to the deception? And what would she and Logan do when McCall left? Where would they go? If they could never again be Mr. and Mrs. Logan Darroch, who would they be? What would she tell her parents? It was all so insane, so hopeless. She had been mad to agree to any of it.

Annoyed to learn the car was not quite ready, Katie was obliged to linger at the garage until close to five o'clock, but by then her decision was made. She had to talk to Logan and make one last attempt to make him see reason, regardless of the consequences.

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What could he do if she absolutely refused to continue the masquerade? A new identity! They weren't criminals, or informers. They needn't go directly to the police. They could find a lawyer, explain the situation, and get responsible legal advice.

It was raining by the time she reached the motel, a sprawling double-tiered affair situated at the intersection of the main north-south highway and the expressway. Low-hanging black clouds had brought a premature twilight. Katie pulled into one of the vacant parking spaces abutting the motel and was just stepping out of the car when a door of one of the units at the far end opened and Logan stepped out. He was carrying a package and as he hesitated, one hand in his raincoat pocket as if searching for his keys, a woman stepped out, the overhead light gleaming on her blonde hair. Logan caught her in a tight embrace and kissed her lingeringly on the mouth.

Then, as Katie stood there, he broke away and, ducking his head against the sudden rain, hurried to the rented car parked in front of the unit. The woman stepped back into the room. Logan climbed into the car and drove away.

She heard the phone ringing as she unlocked the door. Pausing just long enough to switch on a table lamp, she hurried to answer it.

"Katie! Where the hell have you been? I've been calling you for the past hour and a half."

"I just got in."

"I know *that*. Where have you *been?* McCall said you'd gone to pick up the car. That was hours ago."

The note of alarm in his tone provoked nothing but a distracted response. "I've been driving around."

"I waited at the house as long as I dared," Logan said.

"You were here?" Was this where he was going when he left the motel, she wondered, not really caring.

"Over two hours ago! Now listen to me! I brought our friend McCall a present. I promised him a bottle of champagne, remember? Then I wrote you a letter and left it by his bed. After you read it, call the police. Show them the letter. You can verify all the reasons I've had to be depressed. I give them in the letter. We won't be able to meet again until you collect the insurance. There won't be any trouble about it. There's no suicide clause in the policy. Then we'll be free, sweetheart. We can do anything, go anywhere."

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At length, getting no response, he said sharply: "Katie? Are you there?"

"You wrote me a letter?"

"Katie, get *with* it! A suicide note. It's perfect. A suicide note in *my* handwriting. Make sure you don't touch the bottle or glass. Katie, I know I can count on you. You've been terrific through all of this. You won't let me down now. And don't waste time arguing—you're in this as deeply as I am, don't forget."

She was barely conscious of the phone sliding out of her hand. She crept along the hallway to McCall's room. The door was half open, the room dark. She hesitated, then reached for the light switch.

He lay on the bed, his eyes shut. He might be sleeping. The champagne bottle and an empty glass lay on the floor beside the bed. Katie reached for the letter on the bedside table. *Darling, I can't go on like this any longer. I didn't run into that tree by accident. I wanted to kill myself. Only I botched it, the way I've botched everything else in my life. This time I won't. I put enough of the pills the doctor gave me when I left the hospital into the champagne to do the job right. I'm sorry, my angel. Please try to forgive me. I love you. Logan.*

Katie dropped the letter and walked slowly out of the room. In the living room, she picked up the receiver of the phone and replaced it on its cradle. Immediately the phone began to ring. It rang and rang until finally it stopped. She watched with a curious sense of detachment as her hand moved back toward the receiver. The finger dialing the number seemed disconnected from herself.

A woman's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Mother?"

"Katie! Katie, is that you?"

"Mother."

"Darling, I can hardly hear you."

"Mother—"

"Please, Katie, speak louder. I can't hear you."

She began to scream.

Katie's father looked up from his newspaper as his wife came into the kitchen with the tray. "Did she eat anything?"

"A little."

"Good. She'll get her appetite back."

Katie's mother carried the dishes to the sink and turned on the faucet. "I'll never forget the way she was in the hospital. How frightful it must have been for her, Emmet, coming home and finding him

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dead like that. I suppose it's an awful thing to say, but I'll never forgive him for what he's put her through. For a man to be that weak."

"More likely sick, Margaret."

"Maybe I'd be more understanding if we'd ever met the man. If only Katie had brought him to California and married him out here. Instead of just springing it on us in a letter."

Emmet Coleman poured himself another cup of coffee. "I wonder what they'd have done about funeral arrangements if we hadn't been on hand. I can't help feeling sorry for him. An orphan. No friends or relatives we could inform."

"Well, I can't feel sorry for him. Poor Katie, living in a place like Garvey, in that wretched little house, knowing no one."

Her husband nodded toward the paper. "Speaking of Garvey, there's an item here about that murder the day we flew in there."

"You mean the gangster who was blown up in his car at some motel?"

"Seems the hit man who did the job was from right here in L.A. They've arrested him and charged him with the murder."

Mrs. Coleman glanced toward the door. "Well, for heaven's sake don't mention it to Katie. The last thing she needs is to be reminded of anything that happened in Garvey."

"You might know I wouldn't. Not that she remembers anything that did happen there."

"Poor child. I wish—" She didn't finish the thought.

"You wish what?"

"I know it's a wicked thing to say, but I don't care," she declared. "I wish Logan Darroch had been the one blown to smithereens. Before he ever met our girl."

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a *NEW* Em Grady story by

JANE BOSWORTH

Emily and Jake McEwan are off to the rescue again, this time to Restful Haven in California—"one a them communities that walls out ever'body under fifty"—to prevent some trusting pigeons from getting plucked in a private-estate auction. . .

PLUCKIN' PIGEONS

by JANE BOSWORTH

Jake McEwan looked downright dotty standin' in the early mornin' sun dressed in nothin' 'cept a T-shirt, shorts, an' runnin' shoes. You'd a thought a dandy like Jake woulda knowed he had hairy legs the shape a bowed-out toothpicks. He give that fancy Mercedes a his a lovin' pat an' then he got to grinnin' too wide, like a man that's got too much laughin' gas boilin' inside him.

Em, I says to myself, do you 'spose the gigolo a the senior citizens' set is gettin' senile?

Jake, he come astruttin' up onto my porch, grabbed ahold of me, an' planted a kiss on my lips. Then he stepped back an' shed a look a pure contentment on me. "Emily, my love," he cooed, "will you do me the honor of accompanying me to California? I do so enjoy the company of an intelligent woman like yourself."

That old devil's smile come acreepin' up onto his mouth an' I knowed there was more to this than lady-killin'.

"Emily, my dear, sweet Emily—" the words sugared offa his tongue "—I promise you a weekend every bit as exciting as the one we had together in Flagstaff."

Danged iffen them words didn't flush my cheeks an' set my eyes to searchin' the sagebrush for Ella Parker, the town biddy. I reckoned I best get Jake in outta the sun 'fore his voice got any louder.

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Soon as the door to my rock shop clicked closed, I asked him what in blazes he was up to.

"My dear lady," he said, "you shall be my Joan of Arc and I shall be your dauphin. Together we shall drive the thieves into the sea and prevent the plunder of Restful Haven Retirement Village. We have been summoned, my dear, by an old friend of mine."

"I reckon I ain't gonna be summoned nowheres. Not lessen you stop fiddlin' around an' get on to tellin' me what on earth's wrong with you. This ain't no stage, Jake McEwan, an' I ain't no doe-eyed fan a yours."

Jake sighed heartily. "My sweet Emily," he said, "I shall try to explain the situation as best as I can. My friend's name is Lulu Belle Perkins—"

Lulu Belle Perkins lives in Restful Haven, which is one a them communities that walls out ever'body under fifty. She'd gotten a invite to one a them private-estate auctions put on by the Silver Linin' Foundation. Seems that five years back when she was married to Husband Number Two an' livin' in Phoenix, she'd been invited to one a them auctions put on by the same foundation. She an' about six other trustin' pigeons had gotten themselves plucked by a smooth-talkin' slip of a man that passed himself off as an employee hired jus' to take their checks an' money up to the cashier's window. He even give them receipts. 'Course the goods weren't shipped like he said they was gonna be an' the Silver Linin' Foundation claimed no knowledge of the man or the bogus Bodiam Corporation the checks was made out to. Lulu Belle paid a unexpected call on the auctioneer an' she swears she seen that man comin' outta his office. That same auctioneer was gonna do the auction in Restful Village. Lulu Belle sent along two invites to the auction an' a check made out to Jake for two thousand dollars.

"Is you gonna cash that lady's check?" I asked Jake.

"Dear Emily—" the words dripped outta his mouth "—I already have. Lulu Belle Perkins has an eye for wealthy husbands. I assure you, she can afford it. However, she has informed me that most of the other pigeons invited to that auction can ill afford to lose their money. A few hawk these sales in hopes of finding that one investment bargain which will pay off the doctors' bills or ease the mortgage payments. Will you help them, dear?"

I reckoned I didn't believe him 'bout poor folks livin' in Restful Village. Most poor folks is squattin' in trailers parked somewheres

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in the great Mohave. But I had me a hankerin' to meet a woman that made a career outta marryin' rich men so I said I'd go.

I went on back to my livin' quarters an' started packin'. Jake, he come a pussy-footin' in an' stood there eyein' me. I looked up an' seen the devil's orneriness crow's-footin' in the corner a his eyes.

"Emily," he said, "please pack appropriate clothing for dining in one of the finer restaurants. I do so enjoy my culinary adventures with you."

He snuffled back a chuckle an' I got to mullin' over that fancy dinner he bought me at the El Bayou. I could still see the pained look on that duded-up waiter in the ruffled blouse when my wine spilled into his shoe. "Madam," he spoke to me. "I *do* believe your wine glass is tipping in your hand."

My callused hide musta turned purple, I was so embarrassed. Jake, he got to laughin' hard enough to choke. The waiter spun 'round on his heels an' went sloshin' back into the kitchen with all the dignity of a short-legged penguin, leavin' me to slap the choke outta Jake's throat. I felt like I'd just stepped onto center stage dressed in my birthday suit.

"That weren't funny," I told Jake then an' I told him now.

Jake, he come sidlin' up to me an' I seen somethin' more than carin' in them blue eyes a his.

"My dear, sweet, sweet Emily," he said, "you are never boring, and that is the highest compliment a gentleman can pay to a lady. Please hurry, dear. I would like to be in Restful Village before four this afternoon. We'll take my car."

Now, I ask you. How can you argue with a smooth-talkin' man like that? We were halfway to Blythe 'fore I begun to untie the knots in my tongue. Got all the way to Riverside 'fore the last one loosened enough to let loose a my words.

"How come Lulu Belle Perkins got herself a invite to this here auction?" I asked Jake. "Don't crooks keep track a them they scalp?"

"It was Lulu Belle MacDaniel five years ago," he said. "And if I can believe her letters, she was thirty pounds heavier and a redhead."

"How long you an' Lulu Belle been friends?"

"Decades, my dear Emily. Decades. Every since we first worked together doing the barroom shootouts for the tourists in Old Tombstone. Lulu Belle is quite a woman."

Jake, he got that far away look on his face an' I knowed he was

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back in Old Tombstone sidlin' up to the bar with Lulu Belle Whatever-her-name-was-then. Danged iffen I didn't feel a might jealous a her. Lulu Belle Perkins. Sounded like a overweight cow chawin' over the years with the rest of the over-the-hill cows in the barn.

But Lulu Belle Perkins weren't no cow. She looked like a teenager with wrinkles. Blonde hair ponytailin' behind her head, sea-green eyes framed in too much eye-shadow, an' a figure that didn't need no cinchin' up anywheres. Got me to marvelin' 'bout the miracles a modern medicine.

"Jake McEwan, you old reprobate," she said. "Come on in and make yourself at home."

Jake, he walked on in an' settled into one a them fancy couches a hers, leavin' me at the door feelin' like a thistle that'd browned instead a bloomed. Lulu Belle give my hand a little squeeze an' guided me inside.

"You must be Emily Grady," she said.

"Reckon I am."

"I'm so glad to meet you," she went on. "Jake's letters are filled with praise about you. From what he says, you must be one helluva woman. Just the kind of a woman who might be able to box some sense into an old scoundrel like him."

"Reckon I've done that a few times. Reckon you have, too."

Her mouth snapped closed an' one eyebrow raised in an appraisin' way. She winked. "Jake McEwan loves strong women," she whispered. "Be careful, Emily, or you may have that old reprobate around for a lifetime instead of a few years."

She settled me down 'side a Jake an' set on the loveseat across from us.

"Lulu," Jake said, "what do you remember about the man who took your check in Phoenix?"

"He was well mannered," she said. "Small. And he was missing the tip of the baby finger on his right hand. I remember that because I shook hands with him. But he's not here. I've been down to that warehouse a hundred times and he's not here. But that old fox C. W. Harrington is. He's got his hair kinked up around his head now. Didn't even recognize me."

"What kinda auction is this?" I asked her.

"A one-of-a-kind, love," she answered, "featuring everything from Chippendale furniture to rare stamps. Jake, you'll be bidding on a Cogswell Pepperbox with 'God Save Our Union' inscribed on its gold

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breech. Emily, you are here to bid on a Cupid and Psyche onyx cameo by Tommaso Cades. Each one of these items will sell for better than twenty thousand dollars. There's a pre-auction tea at the warehouse in—" she checked her watch "—forty minutes."

"Reckon Jake an' me will jus' mosey on over to that warehouse," I said. "Poke around some 'fore the crowd comes."

'Tweren't more than ten minutes from Lulu Belle's condo to the warehouse—one a them stucco-an'-steel buildings, stucco walls an' barred doors an' windows. Had painted pink cement floor inside a it an' a musty, varnished smell a touched-up antiques. Buildin' had a stage at one end an' a wood wall with glass windows near the top at the other. In between were fancy rosewood chairs an' tables with dogpad feet an' glass cases full a jewelry, guns, stamps, coins, an' porcelains.

I seen a hallway cut into that wood wall an' I headed for it. It led upstairs to a office that had one desk, a copy machine, an' four doors, all in a row, leadin' outta it. The signs on them doors read in order: Ladies, Mens, Supplies, an' C. W. Harrington. Tweren't nobody there, so I walked over to the desk. I seen a crumpled piece a paper settin' next to a stack a papers an' I uncrumpled it. It was a blurred copy a the ones in the stack—looked like some kinda shoppin' list with people's names, auction items, an' biddin' prices on it. The Cogswell an' the cameo was listed, so I stuffed it inside a my handbag.

I opened the center drawer an' seen a key with a plastic holder attached to it that told how's this was a master key. Figured I'd come back after closin' hours for a look-see, so I pocketed the key, too. Jus' got that drawer closed when I heard the C. W. Harrington door clickin' open. This young woman come abouncin' out, seen me, an' stopped in her tracks like a plow-soured mule.

"Reckon I'm a might early for the tea," I said. "Tweren't nobody downstairs so I come up here."

"Is everything all right in there, Miss Burns?" a voice drifted in from the other side a the C. W. Harrington door.

Miss Burns looked from the desk top to the wastebasket to me, an' I knowed she was athinkin' on that crumpled-up piece a paper. "Name's Emily Grady," I said. "Didn't mean to get in your way."

"Miss Burns?" the voice behind the door said.

I seen her take in all a me an' file me under Harmless Old Lady like so many's done before her.

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"It's all right, Mr. Harrington," she said. "We have a misplaced guest out here, that's all."

She smiled at me. "If you will please go back downstairs," she said, "Mr. Harrington will be down shortly to help you."

On my way to the stairs, I stole a look at C. W. Harrington. Dark curly hair cropped off at the ears. Thick mustache. Looked like one a them daytime soap-opera stars Ella Parker's starry-eyed over. He seen me gawkin' at him an' smiled. I went back downstairs.

The showroom was fillin' up with folks, an' Lulu Belle was flittin' from one to the other, talkin', laughin', movin' on. Jake, he was shadowin' a young woman with as straight a figure as I ever seen. He kept peerin' into the cases an' stealin' glances at her. She'd move on an' he'd be right behind her. Miss Burns an' Mr. Harrington come downstairs. The young woman went over to them an' I seen Jake edge his way closer. Harrington shook hands with the young woman, exchanged words, an' moved on. Jake edged through the crowd to where Lulu Belle were standin' an' the two of them moved away from the crowd to talk. I seen Lulu Belle glance at the dark-haired woman an' nod. Then Jake motioned for me to come on over.

"Emily," he said, "it is time for us to leave. We have a lot of work to do. Lulu, we shall see you at ten o'clock tonight." He took me by the arm an' walked me outta there. Didn't say nothin' till we was inside the suite he'd rented at the Restful Village Inn.

"Emily, my dear," he said, "we have to find a way back into that warehouse. "In less than two hours, C. W. Harrington is meeting with a dark-haired woman. I want to know what it's about. Maybe there's some way we can—"

I dangled the key in front of his nose. "Reckon this here key will get us in," I said. "Whilst you was downstairs trailin' ladies, I was upstairs pokin' into drawers. I come across somethin' else that might interest you."

I handed him the crumpled paper an' he read it over.

"Emily!" he said. "Things are not always what they seem. This list would make it seem like C. W. Harrington has more than one way of plucking pigeons, as you so aptly put it—and the dark-haired lady may be anything but a lady."

It was dusk by the time Jake an' me got back inside that showroom. They was a shadowy darkness inside that gives shape to the furniture an' got me to thinkin' on crouched animals. Jake, he took me

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by the hand an' led me 'cross that room, up the steps, an' into the office. When I stepped near them office windows, I caught a glimpse a somethin' makin' its way 'cross the showroom. When it got close enough, I seen C. W. Harrington an' that dark-haired woman Jake had shadowed comin' our way.

"We got company comin'," I whispered to Jake.

Jake, he musta panicked 'cause he headed for the ladies room. I grabbed ahold a him an' yanked him inside a the supply room, leavin' the door ajar so's we could see into that office.

The lights in the office come on an' I was shocked to see C. W. an' his lady friend within breathin' distance a us.

"Do you have any idea how hot wigs are?" she asked. "They turn your whole head into pools of itchy sweat! And if that stinking wino you hired as a security guard pinches me one more time, I'm gonna change the shape of his nose! I was a welterweight, C.W.! A welterweight!" She had the gruffest voice I ever heard.

C. W. laughed an' blew her a kiss. "If you could just remember to cross your legs when you sit down," he said, "my wino guard might be less enamored. You really do have lovely thighs, Jeremy."

Jeremy. I thought of what Jake had said. "The dark-haired lady may be anything but a lady."

She certainly weren't no lady—the string a words she let loose woulda reddened a prospector's ears. She kept curlin' an' uncurlin' her fingers, then she made a fist an' took a jab at C. W. Harrington. He started backin' up toward us.

"It was a joke, Jeremy," he said. "A joke. Settle down. We've only got one more day and then we both cash in."

The sound a voices in the hallway stopped his backpedalin'. I risked a look at Jake, an' seen pure fright makin' huge black islands in them blue eyes a his. "Get a hold of yourself," C.W. warned Jeremy. "They're coming up." He edged toward the office door an' his lady friend fixed her hair. It was then I seen the baby finger on her right hand. The tip was missin' . . .

Six grey-haired men an' women come into the office. C.W. give them each a piece a paper an' five one-hundred dollar bills. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "in your hands you have a list of those items you are to bid on. Please memorize the minimum and maximum bid for each item. Get the bidding started and then drop out of it. Understood?"

"What if we get stuck with the bid?" a lady asked.

"I've been in this business fifteen years," C.W. said, "and I've

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never had that happen. Bidding is like gambling—those who get hooked can't stop. I assure you all of our special guests are hooked."

They was a murmur of approval. C.W. invited all them folks to go downstairs so's they could get a first-hand look at what they was to be biddin' on. Jus' 'fore he turned off the lights, he told his lady friend to take the checks of the five highest bidders jus' like always. The checks was to be made out to the L. H. Finely Corporation.

Jake an' me waited fifteen minutes 'fore we eased outta that supply room. We crept over to the windows an' peered into the showroom. First we watched C.W. showin' off merchandise an' then we seen the room empty out. It was almost nine when C. W. Harrington shut the warehouse door behind him.

"Emily," Jake whispered in my ear. "I have a plan which will outwit this gang of crooks." An' he told me what it were.

We left the warehouse, drove to Lulu Belle's condo, an' told her our plan. She added a special twist all her own. One that just might pluck the feathers outta C. W. Harrington.

Jake an' me left 'fore the rest a them bidders was to meet at Lulu's. Figured Lulu Belle could handle things from now on. We went back to our suite an' into our own rooms to sleep. I ain't never slept better.

The auction didn't go like C.W. had planned. Three a his shills got stuck with the bid an' all three was escorted to the cashier's window by a bunco officer that jus' happened to be Lulu Belle Perkins' nephew. Seemed that all three a them folks had a case a the forgets 'cause each a them had left their checkbooks at home. 'Course the officer was quick to point out a stack a counterchecks settin' on the shelf inside a that window, an' he personally checked the ID's a ever' one a them.

I seen Jeremy Lady Friend slink on outta that showroom, leavin' C.W. barkin' for bids. And a funny thing begun to happen. Them shills quit biddin' an' valuable antiques started goin' for cents on the dollar. Lulu Belle Perkins got that cameo for a thousand dollars an' Jake got that Cogswell for five hundred dollars. When the auction ended, C. W. Harrington walked offa that stage with the slump-shouldered shuffle of a defeated soldier.

Lulu Belle Perkins went sashayin' up to him an' forced that crumpled piece a paper into his hand. "The hired help you get these days is so sloppy," she told him. "Important papers just get misplaced or lost or stolen. Isn't that true, Mr. Harrington?"

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Her eyes narrowed on him the way a cat's eyes do on a half dead rat. C.W. opened up that paper, read it, an' gaped at her.

"It was a different story five years ago in Phoenix," she continued, "when the slim man with the missing fingertip made off with over a hundred thousand in cash and checks."

She turned an' left C. W. Harrington alone. The look on his face told me he was losin' the game a matchin' faces wth names.

Lulu Belle all but danced over to where Jake an' me was standin'. "He musta lost two hundred thousand dollars," I said.

"Mr. Harrington will lose more than money," she answered. "Those shills aren't going to mortgage their homes to pay for merchandise they don't want. Immunity will offer its own rewards."

She pulled a white envelope outta her pocketbag an' handed it to Jake. "The rest of the reward money, gallant knight," she chirped. "I hope you and Emily find a way to enjoy it."

She waltzed off, leavin' Jake an' me alone.

"I mighta knowed, Jake McEwan. After all these years, I shoulda knowed. You don't do no favor for nothin', do you?"

"Emily—" they was a might a pain in his voice "—please do not say anything else until you see what I have for you."

He pulled a set of floppy red tickets outta his wallet an' handed them to me. They was first-class airline tickets to New York City.

"Our plane leaves at noon," he said. "We shall dine at the finest restaurants, see Broadway shows, and stroll down Fifth Avenue together. We have eight thousand dollars to have fun on. Emily, my dear, will you honor me by sharing this adventure?"

They was somethin' more than funnin' in them blue eyes a his. Somethin' I couldn't rightly believe. Why me? I asked myself. I ain't no fancy woman. Why not you? my inner voice snapped me to attention. Hell, Emily Grady, you only live once. Why not enjoy it?

"Emily?" Jake asked.

"Reckon I always had a hankerin' to see that city, Jake. Reckon you're the man that oughta show it to me."

I seen that old devil's smile come acreepin' cross his lips. He took my hand, bowed before me, an' pressed my hand to his lips. "Be careful, Emily," he said, "or you may have this old reprobate around for a lifetime instead of a few years. Would you like that, dear?"

"Maybe. Iffen he could keep his ears outta private words."

"Lulu Belle Perkins doesn't have a soft voice," he said. "Strong women have strong voices—and tender hearts. That's why I find them irresistably attractive. Shall we go, dear?"

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"Family jokes, though rightly cursed by strangers, are the bond that keeps most families alive." Or so wrote Stella Benson in Pipers and a Dancer *(1924)* . . .

THE JOKE THAT DIED

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Here was this lady on the telephone, calling from four thousand miles away in Baytown, telling Gabriel Griffin that his brother Gus was dead. She sounded as if she had volunteered to be the messenger. "Did you receive my letter about his illness?"

"Yes," Griffin said. "I wrote you back the same day."

"It's happened so quickly. Gus was overweight, as you know, and at first they diagnosed diabetes. We expected him out of hospital in a couple of weeks. Then his heart just gave out."

Griffin experienced something close to panic. He saw his brother floating away from him, diminishing in size, becoming indistinct. He could no longer contact Gus. He felt smothered, as if the supply of air to his lungs had been cut off.

"I won't be able to attend the funeral," he said. "I'm not able to fly. I'm stuck here in London."

"Don't worry, the arrangements will be made by the executor." She adopted a confidential tone. "You realize you are Gus's heir."

"I know." Griffin raised his head and saw Alice watching him from the far end of the kitchen. She had left the table to go and stand by the open doorway with the rose garden behind her. Her cameo face was more beautiful for having absorbed the tragic news from home. "Thank you for getting through to me," he said. "And for being so good to Gus—is it Mrs. Semple?"

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"Miss Semple. Bridget. Everybody at Baytown Lock was very fond of Gus Griffin. None of us were looking forward to his retirement."

"Nor was he. When I spoke to him in February—"

"He told me how you came through when he was depressed. That telephone call really raised his spirits."

"Much good it did him."

"The lawyer handling your brother's estate is Paul Conroy. If you want to get in touch with him, here's his number."

Griffin wrote down the area code and the Baytown number. "I can see why Gus depended on you. Maybe someday we can meet under happier circumstances."

"I'll look forward to that."

He put down the telephone. His wife drifted toward him holding her coffee mug in both hands, just below her chin, like a ceremonial vessel. She moved theatrically—she never moved any other way—and he was reminded of that first heart-stopping glimpse of her through the plate-glass window of La Maison Chic on Ste. Catherine Street in Montreal. He had gone inside for no other reason than to flirt. She made him pay by selling him, in her capacity as shop manager, a two-hundred-dollar dress. Griffin had nobody to buy it for, selected it in her size, and gave it to her, saying no other shape could do it justice.

Now, twenty-four years and two daughters later, they were kicking off the last encumbrances of their marriage here in southwest London, the two of them climbing free. Nothing was simple or clear-cut. He was still in love with her for periods of time. She would go over to Collier's Wood and stay with her schoolteacher lover, Cedric Coombe, and Griffin would miss her. A fortnight later she would be back in the house, and within a few hours the fight would be on.

"Gus is dead?" She cried easily and beautifully; tears were invented for those dark eyes.

Griffin took her head on his shoulder. He inhaled an unexpected fragrance, some new hair rinse she was using at Coombe's place. He was holding somebody else's woman, and while he recoiled from that idea a thought presented itself for consideration. Gus's estate, if generous enough, might provide a way out of present difficulties for everybody. "We have to go and get flowers," he said. "We have to cable flowers for the funeral."

Alice said goodbye outside the florist's shop, then added, "Are you going to call that lawyer in Baytown?"

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"Soon," Griffin said. "I can't be crass. We should let some time go by."

She took a few steps down the street and flagged a taxi. Empty cabs seemed to know the roads she traveled. It was midterm holiday and Cedric was at the flat—she had promised to look in and help him grade papers.

All Griffin needed to know about Cedric Coombe had been told to him by his younger daughter, Ruth, who entered Farnham Road School on the arrival of the family in England four years ago: he was as handsome as the young Errol Flynn, and he had been known to molest a pretty teenager upon occasion.

Ruthie graduated *summa cum aggro*, worked a year, banked her money, then took off for six months on the road in India. She came back darker, leaner, having translated her mother's Mediterranean beauty into the asiatic prototype which may have been its origin. She brought home with her the Copenhagen address of her traveling mate, somebody named Oz. Knowing his daughter, Griffin had a feeling he would never be taken to see the wizard.

The girls would have to be told about Gus. Reaching Ruthie wouldn't be easy since there was no telephone in her bed-sitter. He could go there, but she might or might not be in. Some days she went her own way, visiting friends, getting on a train or a bus for another town, experiencing freedom Griffin had never managed to acquire through his working life as a broadcaster.

Today, for example. At three o'clock he was due on the air at Metro Radio to chair the Gabriel Griffin Telephone Show. Executives or car salesmen or plumbers could take a day off, but not Gabe Griffin. His absence meant one of the other announcers would sit in. Probably his replacement would screw up the show, unable to handle the conversations with all those crazy people. Worse still, he might cope easily and Griffin would be one nudge closer to the door. He had used up his welcome at several Canadian stations; that was why he was here in England, cashing in on the appeal of his colonial accent.

Griffin decided now to go and see his elder daughter Janet at her office. He hoped she would be alone because she was going to take this news of her Uncle Gus's death hard. Two years ago, thinking of leaving United Research, she flew back to Montreal and did some job hunting. There were no good positions available, but the trip was worthwhile because on her return management, aware that they might lose this clever Canadian girl, made her supervisor in

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charge of a team doing in-depth studies of consumer attitudes. With the extra income, she organized a down payment and bought her own flat. And Griffin had heaved a sigh of relief, knowing she was in London to stay.

Her side trip to Baytown on that journey home was typical of Janet. An emotional family girl, she could not depart Canada without going to see Uncle Gus. She stayed three days at the Coronet Hotel, where her father had worked as a bellboy before going on to his first radio job at CBAY. Uncle Gus took time off work, came down and had breakfast with her in the hotel dining room, drove her around to see corners of the town she had heard her father speak of, and gave her at the end of the visit an album of family photographs, including one of Gus towering over young Gabriel, both brothers ill-fitted in their school cadet uniforms.

Janet still talked about the practical joke Gus played on her. He asked her to meet him at Alfredo's Restaurant on Front Street for dinner. She sat alone at a table well past the agreed time, sipping a drink, checking her watch. The manager came and went, murmuring apologies, asking if she would like to order. "The veal piccata is very good," he'd said. But Janet was not ready to proceed without her uncle.

Suddenly the kitchen door swung open and there was Gus in chef's hat and apron, bearing a sizzling pan of the delicious veal and lemon. The whole dinner, salad and dessert as well, were all his own work. The manager was a friend from the lodge. It was an unforgettable meal.

Griffin responded when his daughter told this story by recalling an event from his childhood. Gus, who was eight years older, took him one winter afternoon to the courthouse wall, perched him on the parapet, sprinkled angel dust on his arms, and told him he could fly. Stealing a glimpse over the edge, young Gabriel saw the mound of heaped-up snow beneath him. He pretended to believe, but as he jumped he took hold of Gus and dragged him with him, both brothers hitting the snow, falling over each other, exchanging the usual barrage of punches on arms and shoulders.

"He didn't care," Griffin explained. "Gus dishes out the tricky business, but he can take it, too."

Griffin caught a 93 bus to Putney Bridge, changed there to a 22 that carried him through Chelsea and Knightsbridge and on to Piccadilly where the offices of United Research were located. Janet appeared at reception in response to a call from the switchboard,

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read his face instantly, went silent as she led him up the stairs to her office. She closed the door. "What is it, Daddy?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid, from Baytown."

"Oh, no. Is it Uncle Gus?"

"I'm afraid so. A friend of his telephoned me this morning. There was a letter I kept to myself because I hoped he'd pull through. But now she tells me his heart gave out."

Janet's anguish was not graceful like her mother's. Her face went crimson, tears flooded her cheeks, and she had to blow her nose. "I don't know what to say."

"You're saying it." He could not embrace her. Physical contact had ceased almost completely when he could no longer lift and hold her chest-high with that fragile arm curved around his shoulder, fingers hesitantly touching his hair.

"You can't attend the funeral," she reminded him at last. "You can't fly."

"I said that to the woman who telephoned. Somebody named Semple, Gus's secretary. She said his executor can take care of the arrangements. Mum and I sent flowers this morning. I put your name and Ruthie's on the card."

"I could fly over. They'll give me time off."

"If you want. But what's the point?"

"I know," she said. "Uncle Gus won't be there."

He stayed with her until somebody came in to tell her a meeting was about to begin. She offered to miss it but he said the best thing was for her to get on with her work. As for himself, Griffin was going to cruise past Earl's Court and see if Ruth was in.

The smell in the downstairs corridor was a confrontation of curry and cabbage. Griffin climbed the stairs, wishing his younger daughter had never decided to live in this area. It was sometimes known as "Kangaroo Court" instead of Earl's Court because so many rolling-stone Australians took up temporary residence here. The address seemed to satisfy Ruthie, who since her trip to India had been careful not to put down roots. Tomorrow, her life style seemed to say, I could pick up my bedroll and be gone.

Today she was at home, sitting in a mottled dressing gown at a littered table, glaring into a mug of milky tea with the bag floating in it. Griffin thought of her as a Dickensian character for whom London was exactly the right setting. Only nineteen years old, she reminded him of his mother. Sitting here quietly beside her amid

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the chaos of her room, he felt that if he could only put the agony of his life into words this imperturbable girl would solve everything for him with a few blunt suggestions.

"Well, he didn't suffer anyway," she said. She lowered her head like a bison and sucked up hot tea. Ruthie had only seen her Uncle Gus on a couple of occasions that she could remember. Many of the holiday trips home to Baytown had taken place before she was born or when she was an infant.

Griffin was becoming accustomed to the feeling of no longer having a brother. "They tell me I'm Gus's heir," he said. It seemed wrong to tell her the sad news while withholding this hint of something good to come.

"Does that mean you'll be rich?"

"I doubt it. Gus started with nothing, but he never married and he's been at Baytown Lock all his working life. There's probably an insurance policy."

"When your ship comes in, will you buy me a dinner?"

"With a pint of dry cider for starters."

She had been writing a letter; the pad was on the table, closed, a pen sticking out of it. "How is your Danish friend?" Griffin asked.

"He's making up his mind whether to kill somebody or not." She flicked her cigarette. "I'm advising him to wait. It's difficult to compromise once you're in jail."

"You aren't getting involved?"

"When did I ever do anything to break my father's heart?" She smiled at him with pity and understanding.

Griffin fed himself at a pizza restaurant near the radio station and came out not remembering which variety he had eaten. The studios of Metro Radio were located on Euston Road above Soho. He went in and found everybody too busy, too self-involved, to notice any difference in him, so he decided not to mention his brother.

The program was another dose of the same old tedium. His recorded theme hit the air after the three o'clock news, a rollicking few moments of piano and rhythm by Ramsey Lewis. This was soon faded for the announcement of "The Gabriel Griffin Telephone Show" and nothing as good as the music happened for the next two hours.

"Hello, Gabe, I listen all the time. (A hoarse female voice with an East London accent.) "I want to answer the geezer who was on before about horoscopes, said they were rubbish? Mine in the *Sun* yesterday

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said to expect good news from far away and this morning my sister-in-law rang from Scotland to say she's canceled her visit."

"You won't remember me, Gabe—I rang last year about teaching my cat to talk. (Educated lady, a few sherries to the good.) "Well, I figured it out. The cat is Russian, it doesn't understand English. I've been wasting my time."

In the early days, Griffin had introduced a couple of meaty topics each day at the beginning of the show—how it feels to be unemployed, or how single-parent families cope—and those programs had generated heat and light. But management received a few complaining letters from reactionaries, objecting to opinions coming out of their radios, so Griffin was asked to keep it light, to divert the folks at home between sessions with the hoover or while waiting for the kettle to boil. Not wanting to face the possibility of job hunting in his forties, he went along.

"My husband used to keep me awake with his snoring, Gabe. But not any more." (A granny with a Geordie accent.) "I tie a big blue ribbon round his chest holding a wooden spool in the middle of his back . . ." Griffin glanced at the studio clock; time passes slowly when you're in the grinder.

There was a personal call waiting for him when the program ended at five. He took it in the record library. "It's me," Alice said. "Are you coming home?"

"Do you think I should?"

"Cedric wants to talk to you. It's important."

Griffin went home wondering what the schoolteacher had to say. There had been a time when he believed Cedric Coombe was a good man. Ruthie had done well in her final year at Farnham Road School, putting in just enough effort to indicate the level she could have reached had she wanted to try. Then she opted for freedom and the India trail instead of trying examinations which would have led her on to university. One day, when there was still time for her to change her mind, a young man dressed in a duffel coat presented his Ivanhoe beard at Griffin's front door. It was his first look at Mr. Coombe, the English master.

In a conversation around the kitchen table, Ruthie not in attendance, it was agreed that she ought to continue her education but that only she could make the decision. As it turned out, Coombe's trip was for nothing—except that it served to introduce him to Alice.

Griffin came in now to find them at that same kitchen table. With

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the evening sun going down, they were drinking gin and tonic. Cedric extended a hand and Griffin had to shake it. The man was sleeping with his wife (taking her off Griffin's hands, which was what he wanted, right?) and the three of them existed in this atmosphere of cordiality that was doing terrible things to Gabe's stomach lining.

"I've told Ced about Gus," Alice said.

"You have my sympathy," Coombe said.

"Thanks." Pretty soon, Griffin told himself, he was going to have to free some time to grieve for his brother.

Alice mixed Griffin a drink without asking him, getting the blend just the way he liked it, hurting him in all innocence. "Go ahead," she said to the teacher, "tell him your plan."

"It's slightly embarrassing," Coombe said, sounding and looking pleased with himself. "They've asked me to leave the school. Something happened when I was taking rehearsals for the sixth-form play."

"He put his hands on one of the girls and she told her parents," Alice explained.

"Sixteen years old and advanced for her age. Anyway, finding another teaching job in England will prove difficult."

"But we may have a way out," Alice said. "The plan, Cedric."

"Right." Coombe finished his drink and took a breath. "I've always wanted to work in America, not teaching school but in the theater. I know some people in New York who say they could fit me in. But I need capital to see me settled down. I'll be given redundancy pay by the education authority, and I have some savings, but hardly enough—even for one." The prepared speech ran out.

"I'd be going with him," Alice went on. "And if I could take a lump sum with me, enough to see us over the early stages, we'd be able to make it."

The room felt stuffy. Griffin went to the back door, opened it, and let in a flood of evening air. "You're asking me to stake you. Out of Gus's estate."

"Depending on what it amounts to," Alice said. "But it's bound to be quite a lot, wouldn't you say?"

"Let's talk about it when it happens."

"That could take months."

"I don't know how long it takes. My brother never died before."

It was the sort of abrasive retort Alice would normally have forced back down his throat. Today, she let it pass. "Can't we find out? The

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woman on the telephone this morning left you the name and number of the lawyer."

"Sweet Jesus," Griffin said. "Gus's funeral has not taken place. I'm not able to attend. And you want me to telephone and ask how much money I'm getting?"

"I don't see what one thing has to do with the other."

"Not your brother. Not your home town."

"Then let *me* place the call. I don't mind. I can say there are things happening here and it would be useful for you to know roughly what the amount might be and roughly when it will arrive."

He said nothing.

"Will you let me make the call?"

With his mourning for old Gus barely under way, Griffin had to face the truth of his own self-interest. He, just like Alice and her lover, wanted to know how much cash was coming. "You may as well go ahead," he said quietly.

The time difference was right for early afternoon in Baytown. Alice dialed directly through to the office of Paul Conroy. Her presence on the telephone did not seem to surprise the lawyer.

"I can give you a ballpark figure," he said. "We're talking mainly about five years' worth of Gus Griffin's pension plan. Should be somewhere in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand. Estate taxes and various fees have to be paid. Expect something around eighty thou. The red tape should be finished and you'll receive a check within six to eight weeks."

Alice put down the telephone and stared into space. "He said something between eighty and a hundred thousand."

"Dollars?"

"How much is that in pounds?" Coombe asked.

"Has to be sixty grand," Griffin said. "At least."

In a small voice, Alice began to sing:

"New York, New York,
It's a wonderful town . . ."

With tears in his eyes, Griffin left the kitchen. He sat in the living room in near darkness with the sun setting on the other side of the house. Gus had been only months away from taking early retirement. He was about to begin enjoying himself after working hard for all those years. So much for the principle of nose to grindstone. Dear old Gus with his love of life and his practical jokes—the laugh was on him in the end.

Alice came into the room and knelt beside her husband. "I'm sorry

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to sound happy—I know how you must be feeling. I loved Gus, too. But Gus would want us to be pleased about the money. That's why he left it to you. He had no family of his own—you and I and Janet and Ruthie, *we* were his family. He wanted us to make use of the inheritance and have fun."

All at once, Griffin wanted very much to be alone—on a long-term basis. Yes, let Alice get on a plane with Coombe and go to New York. No more of this on-again, off-again relationship with her shuttling between here and the teacher's flat in Collier's Wood. Perhaps with all connections severed, the wound would heal once and for all and he might emerge a stronger person.

He could do even more, Griffin realized. How about a cash payment from Gus's estate for each of his daughters? There would surely be enough to deliver a grand each to Janet and to Ruth. The older girl with her well paid job was not much in need, but for Ruthie in bed-sitter land a check for a thousand pounds would be manna from heaven.

"All right," he said, seeing his wife's face light up as she realized she had handled him again, "make your plans."

Griffin invited his daughters to the house for dinner to give them the good news in person. He saw no reason to wait until the legalities were gone through. Why not let them enjoy the prospect of good things to come? Gus with his buoyant personality would have wanted it this way.

"Now," he said when they had cleared the table after a meal of his famous "perpetual stew," "you may be wondering why I called you here tonight."

"I knew there was something," Ruth said.

"Daddy, what have you done?" Janet said.

"Good news. Well, it's sad that Uncle Gus died, but we're getting used to that. And he did name me as his heir. So Mum was here the other day and she telephoned Baytown and spoke to the lawyer."

"Mum would," Ruth commented. The younger daughter was most like Alice, most damaged by her mother's defection, most inclined to say what she felt. Janet cared, too, but she kept her feelings to herself.

"It seems the amount is substantial. It won't provide financial independence, but we get a nice cash boost. After all taxes and fees are paid, it should come to around sixty thousand quid."

"Ye gods and little fishes," Janet said.

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"Naturally a big chunk goes to Mum. She and Cedric are off to New York. I understand he has an opportunity there."

Ruth said, "You mean he's run out of opportunities here."

"And I intend to hand each of you a check for a thousand pounds."

They radiated delight. Ruthie said it solved all her problems. Janet said it would just about clear her credit cards. Griffin cracked a bottle of wine, and when he walked them to the Underground station a couple of hours later he was swaggering.

Later, falling asleep in the empty house, he saw his life ahead as free of difficulties. Was it really this easy? Did a little money eradicate problems, as he had always suspected? He had been pressed, till now, to earn a living. This influx of cash wouldn't set him up for life but it would increase his options. Back in Montreal, he had been a hustling DJ. As he entered his forties, competition from the young lads became stiff. Coming to England gave him an edge because here his accent sounded big league to the locals. But even that edge had become blunted by boredom. Only last week he had asked himself how much longer he could go on.

Now the pressure was off. After paying Alice and the girls, he would end up with about forty thousand in the bank. And with Alice gone to America he could sell this house for no less than forty grand, which, after clearing the mortgage, would leave him another twenty. A small apartment would meet his needs. He could work fewer days, become a little independent, pick and choose his spots. He might even take a winter month in Spain, buy himself a pricey wardrobe, then get a boat back to Montreal and arrive looking like a movie star. They would smell success all over him and he might pick up some choice assignment presenting on TV.

Why not? Griffin asked himself as he drifted off to sleep. Why the hell not?

The telephone rang at eight-thirty. Griffin surfaced from his deepest sleep in years. He felt bright and energetic—it was the way he used to wake up in the old bedroom back in Baytown on summer mornings when he had no school to attend and his older brother was getting dressed to go to work. He used to lie there and gaze at Gus's suspenders rising from the band of his trousers and crossing his beefy shoulders. Gus was built like a maple tree, one that had been growing for a hundred years, and seemed just as permanent.

Griffin rolled over and lifted the telephone. "Hello?"

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"Did we fool you?" Gus asked. The high Ontario voice was unmistakable. "Were you taken in?"

"Gus?" Griffin felt his legs go light. Had he been standing he would have staggered. "Is that you?"

"Large as life and twice as surprising. Bridget and I are checked in down here at the Savoy Hotel. A trifle better than the old Coronet. We just ordered room-service breakfast and we're absorbing our first impressions of London. The towel rail in the bathroom is heated!"

"Gus—oh, you didn't. You set this up." Griffin was experiencing a wave of relief from the realization that his brother was alive. But more complicated feelings were stirring underneath.

"When we spoke on the telephone several months ago, your advice had an effect on me, little brother. I was truly depressed, that was no joke. They wanted me to retire early. I'd never done anything but work for that organization. You told me a new life could be starting. You invited me to come and stay with you."

It was true. Griffin had always believed Gus was wasting himself in Baytown. He had the stuff to expand, to spread himself around big cities, other continents—see and be seen.

"I pulled myself together," Gus went on. "Bridget stood by me, she said I didn't have to go it alone. So here we are, retired early with lots of pension money behind us. And first thing on the agenda is a big meal tonight in the Savoy dining room with us and you and Alice and Janet and Ruth. Is tonight okay?"

"We spoke to the lawyer. He told us about your estate as if you were dead."

Gus laughed with boyish delight. "Forgive me, it had to be that way to make the joke work. Details, Gabe. When I got Bridget to ring you up, I had her give you Conroy's name. Then I briefed him in case you called back to check. I even warned them at Baytown Lock in case you rang there—I know you can't fly so you were never going to show up in person." He laughed again. "Boy, did I put one over. You fell for it, Gabe."

"Hook, line, and sinker," Griffin agreed, some of his enthusiasm beginning to evaporate. Gus was alive. He was in London for a visit.

"Will the girls be surprised?" Gus asked.

"Surprised all to hell," Griffin said. "You fooled them, too."

He rang Janet first, got her at home before she left for the office. "Are you sitting down?"

"Oh, Daddy, more bad news?"

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"Gus just telephoned from the Savoy Hotel. It was all one of his practical jokes." Janet was beginning to whoop. "He's checked in there with this woman who was his secretary before he retired."

"She was his accomplice?"

"They want us to dine with them tonight to celebrate the start of their grand tour of Europe." Griffin could not resist adding, "Financed with *our* money."

"I'm glad you caught me! I have to rush, I have to change my clothes to look right for the Savoy! Oh, God, Uncle Gus is incredible—I knew he couldn't be dead!"

When Griffin dialed Cedric Coombe's number, it rang for a long time. Alice answered abruptly.

"Sorry, did I wake you up?"

"I was in the 'loo."

"Is Cedric there?"

"He's pretending to be asleep."

"Well, listen. All is not as we believed."

"Is the money less?" she said sharply.

"It is nonexistent. There is no money."

"What do you mean? Was he broke?"

"He isn't dead. It was one of Gus's practical jokes. He called me just now from the Savoy. He's there with the woman who telephoned from Baytown."

"I don't believe this." Alice spoke sharply away from the telephone. "Cedric, look alive. There is *no* money."

Griffin made arrangements to meet his wife outside the Savoy that evening, suggesting that Coombe ought not to be of the party since Gus believed the family was still intact. Then he got dressed and made the trip to Earl's Court once again to inform his younger daughter that her Uncle Gus was alive and well and breakfasting at the Savoy.

Ruthie was pensive. "Complications," she said. She continued putting together a cigarette with her kit of papers and tobacco pouch spread out before her on a table. "Very bad timing."

"What's wrong?"

"I got through to Oz last night in Copenhagen. I told him five hundred quid was on the way. This took him off a very bad hook."

"But we didn't know when we were getting the money."

"My promise was good enough." She raised those level eyes. "Dad, I can't let him down."

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Griffin knew what she meant. "I can't help you now. I don't have the proverbial pot, darling. I'm sorry."

Ruthie took a deep breath as she licked the cigarette paper. "Well, somebody has to die," she said. "And it isn't Oz and it surely won't be me."

Griffin met Alice outside the hotel. Her face was showing the strain. "You'll have to go in without me," she said. "I can't confront Gus after what's happened."

"Nothing's happened. He's simply played one of his little tricks."

"We made our plans. Our lives were changing—" She lost her balance, teetered against a plate-glass window.

"Are you all right?"

"I need a drink. Can we go somewhere? Have you the time?"

He guided her across the street to a pub, installed her at a small table, and carried two doubles from the bar. "I know how you feel," he said.

"For weeks Cedric has been touching bottom. He's finished in England, Gabe. He'll never work again as a teacher. This thing in New York is really promising—we've talked about it a lot. When Gus's money came through, when we *thought* it was on the way, everything changed. If you could have heard us making our plans this afternoon before you telephoned."

"I do understand," Griffin said. "No disrespect, but having you and him out of the country was going to uncomplicate *my* life."

Alice sipped her drink. "He has a nerve, messing up our lives this way."

"He meant no harm."

She watched her husband empty his glass. "Oh, for a timely accident," she said.

"What?" He knew exactly what she meant.

"If Gus should come to a sudden end, all bets would be on again."

"When I gave Ruthie the news, she hinted the same thing."

"I always understood Ruthie."

"She's committed some of the nonexistent money to that mysterious friend in Denmark."

Alice opened her handbag, took out mirror and lipstick. As she touched up her mouth she said, "We don't even know for sure if you're his heir."

"I am. He made that clear last spring when he was depressed and I gave him my famous pep talk on the telephone. And in the letters

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we exchanged afterward. I'm in his will—there's no joking about that."

"Then all we need is for something to happen."

Griffin looked at his watch. "I'm due at the Savoy. Are you coming?"

"I'd never get through it. Tell him I'm not well. Give him my love."

Gus Griffin topped the feast by ordering brandy with everybody's coffee and insisting that his nonsmoking brother take a few heady puffs on a giant cigar. "Under other circumstances," he said, "these delightful ladies would withdraw to the withdrawing room leaving us gentlemen to our stogies and our stories." Gus's great flushed face radiated a sense of control. His massive chest and shoulders filled the expensive dinner jacket and his thick black hair had been expertly trimmed that afternoon by the hotel barber. "I for one am glad that charming Janet and sweet Ruth and my very dear Bridget are not about to leave us for one second."

"Hear, hear," the girls chorused. The entire meal had been conducted by Gus like a board meeting at Baytown Lock.

Bridget Semple was a stocky little woman in her late forties with smooth, short mahogany hair and tinted glasses with gold-wire frames. She glanced alertly from face to face around the table. "You're all such terrific sports. I can't get over it. I said to him, Gus, they're going to break your neck."

"I know my prankish brother of old," Griffin said.

Janet was sitting next to her uncle. She put an arm across his shoulder and rocked him to her. "It was the best joke he could have done. Better than a joke. It's been emphasized how much we love you, Uncle Gus." There were tears in her eyes. "You were taken away from us and now you've come back."

"Let's not have a sniffle," Ruthie murmured into her brandy, "Let's have a bloody good cry."

The arrangement was made that Gus and Bridget would take a day to rest up from their flight and to indulge in a session of prowling through West End London streets. On the following day, they would journey down to Wimbledon to let Gabriel repay the hospitality. Alice, Griffin promised, would be up and around by then. Janet and Ruth would try to make it, but if this wasn't possible the brothers would have some time together while Bridget and Alice got to know each other.

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"Come for a drink," Griffin said to his daughters outside the hotel.

"I won't say no," Ruth accepted.

Janet looked at her watch. "Raincheck, Daddy," she said. "I've got a heavy meeting in the morning. There's some preparation I have to do tonight." She looked from her sister to her father. "What are you two thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about a quiet pint," Ruth said.

Inside the pub, they found Alice still drinking at the back table. She had been joined by Cedric Coombe. "How was the banquet?" she asked.

Coombe cleared a place beside himself for Ruth but she made a business of dragging up a low stool, putting the table between herself and the teacher. He laughed. "You're safe in a crowded pub," he said.

"I don't want to catch anything," Ruth said.

Alice said, "Don't you two start."

"Ruthie, calm down," Griffin said. "Your mother and her friend are going to America. I've decided."

"But the money—" Coombe began.

"Listen!" Alice put a hand on Cedric's arm while she stared at her husband.

"And your friend Oz in Copenhagen will get his five hundred as promised."

Ruth accepted a cigarette from her mother. "It means taking out Uncle Gus. Probably that little woman of his, too."

"I'm thinking about it."

"You'd do this for us?" Coombe said.

"I'm doing it for myself. Last spring when Gus was depressed, all I wanted was to talk him out of it, to get him over here and help him enjoy his retirement. When I heard he was dead, the sense of loss was terrible. Suddenly he's here, it was all a joke." Griffin stared into his drink. "One too many," he said.

"Making us think we'd be getting money," Alice complained.

"It isn't only the money. He works me like a puppet. He always has."

"It's cruel," Ruth said.

"Worse than that. It's as if I'm something he's always owned, one of his toys. And he handles me with such contempt."

The bell rang for last orders. Coombe took the empty glasses to the bar. Alice said, "Have you decided how you're going to do it?"

"It must look like an accident," Griffin said.

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"I don't see why you're talking about it," Ruth said. "Three of us are going to know you've killed him. That's three too many."

"If he died after all that's happened, wouldn't you suspect something?" her father said. "You'd be curious, asking questions. But having warned you, I'll expect discretion."

When the pub closed, Alice and Cedric got into the teacher's car for the drive to Collier's Wood. Griffin shared a District Line train with Ruth to Earl's Court, from where it would continue on down to Wimbledon. They rode in silence as far as Sloane Square Station, then she remarked, "Cedric is going to spend all that money in New York in about six months. After which he's going to return for more. Blackmail."

"I'm not worried about Cedric," Griffin said. "If I tell him I'm going to tear his head off, he'll believe me and go away. No, it's your sister." He nodded his head soberly. "Janet loves Gus more than all of us put together."

Ruth left the train at Earl's Court, climbed the steps to ground level, and walked to her building on a side street just off the main road. She was not entirely surprised to find her sister waiting by the doorway. "I thought you had work to do."

"I got this terrible feeling when I said goodbye to you and Daddy outside the hotel."

"Spit it out."

"Something's going on. You've all made plans to spend Uncle Gus's money."

"That's what it's for."

The older girl held her sister's gaze. "It's true, then."

"Come on upstairs, I'll make us some tea."

"I can't, I really have a meeting tomorrow."

"Okay, I invited." Ruth found her key, inserted it in the lock.

"I'm going to warn Uncle Gus."

"He'll think you're crazy."

"Don't try anything. Tell Daddy."

"You tell him." Ruth went inside. "He thinks you're the greatest thing since video cassettes."

Gus said to the receptionist, "Would you please let Janet Griffin know her uncle is here to take her to lunch?"

Janet's clattering approach down the curving staircase from the offices on the floor above reminded Gus of the way young Gabriel used to arrive for breakfast in the old house in Baytown. That stac-

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cato gallop used to signal—however deep the overnight-gloom surrounding parents and older brother—that there was life in the Griffin household.

They went to a restaurant specializing in Asian food. Janet called it Stuffing a Curry. Over the meal, they fell into the easy relationship established a couple of years ago during Janet's side-trip from Montreal. "Where's Bridget?" she asked when they finished ordering.

"Shopping." End of that subject. They proceeded to family history and spoke of little else throughout the meal. Janet, with her inquiring mind and retentive memory, had established herself as a storehouse of Griffin lore. Finally, over coffee, Gus was saying, "Gabriel was always a ball of fire. He did big things in high school, scored thirty points a game for the basketball team. I sat at a table and kept score, one of the forgotten alumni back watching his young brother shine."

"Can't have games unless somebody keeps score."

"I studied bookkeeping, became an accountant, settled in with Baytown Lock, and never worked anywhere else. Gabe wasn't so predictable. Except we always knew he would do exceptional things. Working at the Coronet Hotel as a bellboy—who'd have thought a Griffin would ever do that?"

"I still find it hard to believe—my father!"

"Then making it with CBAY, a local hero, late-night DJ. We knew the town could never hold him. Montreal, success with the telephone show, it was inevitable. The move to England surprised us, but he seems to have established himself here, too."

"Daddy always tells me," Janet said, "that if you have the stuff and if you work hard there's no way you can fail."

Gus covered the check with cash for the waiter to take away. "A family axiom," he said, "passed on to us by our Presbyterian father. But with Gabe there was always one problem. Money."

Janet raised her eyebrows. "What money?"

"A few months after he moved to Montreal, only twenty-one years old, he wrote to me asking for a thirty-dollar transfusion. I sent him a check and he repaid me at the end of the month. It happened again a month later. On the third occasion, I responded with the loan but felt impelled to say in my letter that he ought to look at his outgoings. He seemed to be living beyond his means."

"What did Daddy say back?"

"He was nobody's daddy then, dear. He was a footloose and fancy-

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free radio announcer. He continued to write me letters but he never referred to my advice. And he never asked for money again."

On the street, strolling back to the office with her hand through the bend of Gus's arm, Janet said, "You'll think I'm crazy."

"What?"

"I'm worried about you. Be careful."

"I always am."

"But Daddy and the others—they may do something desperate. When we thought you were dead, we were sad. But then the news of all that money in your will came through and it changed people's attitudes."

"Not yours, obviously."

"It's easier for me. I have a big salary and my expenses are only average. But Mum has a friend and they've made plans to go to New York. It would be better for Daddy if they did. And Ruthie has this mate in Copenhagen, she promised to bail him out of some jam he's in."

"I see." Gus smiled at his niece. He walked on for half a block without speaking. Then he said, "It's only a temporary postponement. Perhaps I should tell them."

"What do you mean?"

They were at the front door of Janet's office building. "They won't have to wait much longer for their money."

Janet's eyes began to fill up. "I don't think I want to hear this."

"It's the reason why I'm here. I wanted to see everybody again. And it explains why I had to retire early. I suffered a bad attack last winter. The doctor says the next one will be the last."

Janet's problem-solving mind worked swiftly through the bad news and came up with the only positive response. "Stay here, Uncle Gus. You and Bridget. You'll take a small flat and we'll have so many good times together."

"Charming idea, Janet. But I'm a Baytown boy. I think I'd better go home."

Griffin opened the door wide, spreading his arms to welcome Gus and Bridget to the house in Wimbledon. They moved through the rooms minutes later, carrying the first frantically poured glasses of whiskey, inspecting the layout and the occasional family heirloom.

"Look," Gus said, indicating a framed picture, one of a group mounted on a wall at the foot of the stairs. "Gabe and myself in the uniforms of our respective cadet corps."

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"Let's eat," Griffin said. "Everything's ready." He raised his voice. "Alice!"

Alice appeared at the top of the stairs. "Here I come," she said. She joined them, looking brittle—as if her makeup had been reapplied once too often.

"We missed you the other night at the Savoy," Gus said. "Give us a kiss."

"I hope you don't mind eating in the kitchen," Griffin said, leading the way. "It's pot luck. Alice hasn't been feeling well and I just got back from the studio."

He served up bowls of stew in gravy as dark and thick as molasses. "My famous perpetual stew," he said.

"Infamous," was Gus's comment.

"I have to organize meals as best I can. I'm at the radio station from three o'clock every afternoon." He poked a wad of beef into his cheek. "Hell, Gus, you may as well know. Alice doesn't live here any more."

"Hallelujah," Alice said, "we're moving on to the truth."

"But you came back especially for us," Bridget said. "We're flattered."

"We're separated," Griffin explained. "It may end up in divorce if either of us finds another partner."

Gus's face was pale and cold as the November moon. "I always thought of this family as one of the happy ones. You're *my* family. I want it to be permanent."

"What you want, Gus, and what you get are not the same thing," Griffin said. "I've had to learn that."

They finished eating and moved into the back garden for coffee. There was an hour's worth of light left in the sky. "Come for a walk, Gus," Griffin said. "I want you to see the park at the end of the road."

"Go ahead," Bridget said. "Alice and I will sit here and drink and talk dirty." As the men left them, she added, "Don't overdo it, Gus."

They wandered along the quiet street, past the corner of Arthur Road with the Underground station in view, continuing on to the gateway and the paved path leading into Wimbledon Park.

"Those tennis courts fool visitors," Griffin said, indicating a layout of clay courts installed by the council for public use. "They think it's the famous Wimbledon they've seen on television and it looks wrong."

"Where's the real thing?"

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"On the other side of the lake. You can't see it from here, but on a June evening you can hear the sound of tennis balls being hit, and the applause." He led the way down a hill past a play area for children and through another gateway onto a curved walkway surrounding the lake.

"This is magnificent," Gus said.

"Whenever I'm feeling low, I come down here," Griffin said. "It's never anything but beautiful."

There weren't many people around. The sun was down, light fading from the sky. Soon, Griffin knew, a bell would ring and all visitors would be expected to leave. He knew from experience that the guard on duty was lazy. He was supposed to tour the place, making sure all visitors were out, but he seldom took the trouble.

Gus sat on a bench. They had come here at a fair pace. He was breathing heavily and his face was drained of color. "I owe you an apology, little brother," he said.

"What for?" Griffin sat beside him.

"That lousy practical joke I played on you. The sudden death, the will. I don't know what came over me." He showed his brother the poker face that he used to mask serious feelings. "The inheritance, however, is real."

"Don't give it a thought, Gus. Janet was right. The event showed us how much we care about you."

"Bridget was against it."

"None of her business."

"You don't know Bridget."

"She's not good enough for you, Gus."

"What's my choice, Gabe?"

"Maybe you don't have any." There was something Griffin wanted to say. "You never did anything with your life. Tell the truth. We both started the same. But you fell into your cushy job at Baytown Lock and you've never been anywhere. You're here in England now, but it's too late for you. I went to Montreal and then I came to London. I've been extending myself." Griffin got up from the bench, rubbing his hands together. "And I'm not finished yet. I intend to grab any opportunity that presents itself."

"And I intend to help you, little brother."

"I can succeed without your money."

A bell rang in the distance. Griffin moved to the edge of the lake. He looked down into water five feet deep. Then he turned and in-

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spected the path around the lake in either direction. They were alone in this end of the park.

"Have a look at this," he said. "They keep fish in here. You can see them nudging around."

Gus arose with difficulty, pushing himself up with fists on knees. He walked to his brother's side.

"See there?" Griffin said. As Gus stepped to the edge and bent to look, Gabe put both hands on his back and tipped him forward. Gus broke the water and sank to the bottom. He rolled over and came up face first. Griffin knelt on the pavement and leaned forward as if lending a hand. But with his extended fingers, he pushed Gus under, did it again, shifting his position on his knees to stay close to the drowning man as he drifted.

At last, Gus turned face down and floated away, the back of his jacket bulging with a bubble of trapped air.

Griffin stood up and began to run toward the gateway. "Help!" he called. "Somebody—help!"

He was approaching the dark opening in the iron fence when he saw the young woman coming in. She stopped and stared at him and Griffin knew he would never have to explain to her what had happened. It was his daughter Janet and she was out of breath from running to save her uncle's life.

Griffin had never seen the Concorde take off before, except in films. Now, seated at a table in the lounge at Heathrow, he stared through glass at the droop-nosed airplane as it raced down the runway and rose suddenly on its menacing delta wing, reaching for the grey overcast at five thousand feet. The slender machine looked like a bird; he expected to see a dead rat clutched in the retracting undercarriage.

Janet said, "For a man who won't fly, you certainly like to watch airplanes."

"I can't do it," Griffin said. "When they closed the door and I couldn't get out, I'd go mad."

"Gus used to talk about your claustrophobia," Bridget said. "Your brother would understand your not coming home."

"I'm sure he understood everything," Janet said, not looking at her father. "Right to the end."

"I'm sorry about the expense," Bridget went on, "having the estate pay for shipping his body back to Baytown. The cost is shocking. But I'm afraid it was specified in the will."

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"My father comes out the same," Janet said. "I'm not accepting my share of Uncle Gus's money."

"Janet, love, I can simply send it to you."

"And I'll simply send it right back."

Bridget looked from father to daughter. "It's distressing, isn't it. First the practical joke which I thought was a mistake. Then the shock to you all of discovering Gus was alive. And now the heart attack when he fell into the water. That was on the cards, I'm afraid—any sudden exertion." She put a hand on Griffin's arm. "And you must stop blaming yourself. You did what you could. He must have weighed a ton soaking wet. Even had you managed to drag him out instantly, he would have been gone."

A voice on the loudspeaker announced the Air Canada flight for Toronto. Bridget stood up. "Wait for me, please. I'm off to the washroom."

Janet's chair was angled away from the table. She was giving her father a quarter profile. "You don't have to wait," she said. "You didn't even have to come."

"I wanted to be with you."

"I expect you're waiting to see if the plane crashes. It's no use, Daddy. I took out insurance but I made the beneficiary Oxfam."

"Christ, Janet—let me up."

"*Why?* You murdered Uncle Gus!"

"He died of a heart attack. You heard the autopsy report."

"Everybody dies because his heart stops. You put Gus in the water. They all wanted it—Mum and Cedric and Ruth. And so did you." There were no more tears. Her voice was hard. "I blame myself. I tried to make it to the house before you got him alone, but I couldn't get out of the office."

Griffin tried the only argument left to him. "Yes, I pushed him in. But as soon as he fell, I didn't want him to die. I was truly trying to save him."

His daughter turned her head slowly and looked him in the eye. That sad, cold inspection would be all the punishment Griffin needed in this world.

Bridget came back and they headed for the Departures gate, Griffin helping with the hand luggage. Bridget went through first, kissing his cheek as she took her satchel. "Keep in touch," she said.

"You'll be doing this again soon," Janet said, about to follow, "when Mum and Cedric go to New York."

"Good luck in Toronto," Griffin said. "You'll find a job in no time."

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"And again when Ruthie bales out for Copenhagen or Katmandu or wherever."

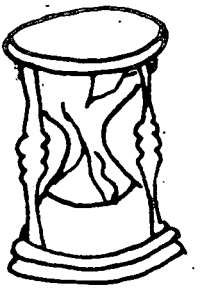
"Janet—"

"Then you'll be left with yourself." She laughed and rolled her eyes. "Talk about a life sentence."

Griffin returned to the lounge and drank by himself while he waited for the airplane to take off. It went at last, with Gus's coffin in the freight compartment and Janet behind one of the glowing windows. It wasn't fair, he told himself. People a lot more wicked than he were walking around having fun. Maybe he would move to New York, try for a radio job, spend his free time pestering Alice. He'd be within easy reach of Toronto—perhaps she would relent in time and accept him for a visit. In the meantime, Ruthie was still around—she would understand what he was going through.

The waiter approached and bent over him like an usher in church. "Are you having any more, sir?"

Griffin laughed. "How much have you got?"



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Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
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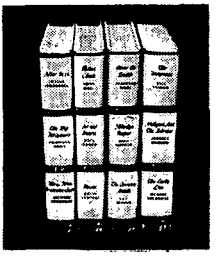

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MORE GRAVE TONES

by JAMES HOLDING

Hic iacet Howard "The Snatcher" Guest,
Well known son of the Golden West,
Who made his living (and that quite handsome)
By stealing children to hold for ransom,
Until one day he happened to make
A perfectly innocent mistake:
He tried to kidnap a likely lad
Reputed to have a well heeled dad,
But learned too late it was just plain silly
To try to kidnap The Kid called Billy.

Here lies Jonathan "Hot Wire" Keefe,
An easily rattled auto thief,
Who one night stole a likely car
From a darkened lot near a noisy bar.
And a couple of cops who were parked close to it
Happened to see poor "Hot Wire" do it,
So when he left, at a rapid pace,
The cops in their black-and-white gave chase
With sounding siren and blinking light,
Following "Hot Wire" into the night.
He zigged and zagged in his purloined hack,
Trying to leave the cops far back,
And then, by chance, in his twisting track,
He found himself in a cul de sac—
Blocked, alas, by a concrete wall
With no way out of the place at all
Except by the way that he came in it,
Where the cops would be in another minute.
"Hot Wire" was rattled—he made a mistake—
He stepped on the gas instead of the brake.

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